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The Nation’s Freshwater Coast Is a Key Fulcrum for Rust Belt Revival.

There’s growing evidence of rapidly spreading income and opportunity divides between the dynamic, growing metropolises of America’s East and West coasts and the Heartland in between.

Yet there is a third U.S. coast, a “freshwater coast” along the more than 10,000 miles of Great Lakes shoreline, that is proving to be an important fulcrum for economic renewal in America’s interior. Continued federal efforts are especially critical for securing the future of many smaller communities that line that coast.

As documented in prior posts, heavy industry along the Great Lakes shores and rivers of the region powered the Midwest’s economic growth. Green Bay, Wis. grew as a paper mill town, fouling the Fox River as it entered Lake Michigan. Across the lake in Muskegon, Mich., paper mills, chemical plants, and auto parts plants turned spectacular Muskegon Bay into a toxic hotspot. Duluth, Minn.’s waterfront was an industrial port, where the Front Range’s iron ore was shipped to Marquette across Lake Superior and on to the steel mills abutting the Great Lakes in Gary, Ind., Cleveland, and Buffalo.

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The Brookings Institute

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