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On Water Problems, Governments Actually Work Together.

When it comes to dirty lakes and rivers, governments have learned how to cooperate.

The greatest lubricant for intergovernmental harmony may well be water. I know that sounds odd, but the nation's largest bays and lakes offer compelling examples of how multiple states can work with each other — and also with towns and cities, federal agencies, universities, nonprofits, and foreign governments — to combat water pollution.

There is a lot of work to do. Ambitious surveys of more than 2,000 locations carried out in five-year cycles by the states and the Environmental Protection Agency show that a little more than half of the nation's rivers and streams are significantly polluted. That dirty water, in turn, flows downstream into the nation's bays, lakes and coastal areas. The chief contaminants are nitrogen and phosphorus, which contribute to the formation of algae blooms that lower oxygen levels needed to support aquatic life. A lot of the phosphorus comes from fertilizer, so the problem is particularly acute near farmland, though urban areas contribute as well. Once the chemical is introduced, it poses a permanent problem for the water, much like the carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere.

A good example of this phenomenon is Lake Champlain in New England — one of the most beautiful inland lakes in the country, but also one of those most threatened by what is known as "legacy phosphorus." A recent study by the University of Vermont estimated that almost 240,000 tons of pollution had accumulated in the watershed in the past 90 years.

The Lake Champlain Basin Program was created 23 years ago and has the support of Vermont, New York and the Canadian province of Quebec, plus a wide array of local governments and private organizations. The regional administrator of the EPA has been a consistent player, as has the Quebec premier. The most recent report of the program concluded that the deterioration in the lake's water quality had subsided somewhat, but that the long-term problem of phosphorus buildups in parts of the lake continues.

The Lake Champlain Basin Program was marked for elimination this year by the Trump administration's proposed budget, but Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the vice chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, had a blunt response: "That's not going to happen." He instead succeeded in getting the program a $4 million increase in funds this year. But the EPA did make it clear that the governments in the program must develop a new funding source of their own so the work can continue "regardless of fluctuations in federal spending."

Compared to Lake Champlain, the Chesapeake Bay is vast, with a watershed covering more than 64,000 square miles, including parts of Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia, as well as Washington, D.C. But there are similarities: The campaign to save the bay is well coordinated, largely by the EPA's Chesapeake Bay Program, created in 1983 and headquartered in Annapolis, Md. Here, too, the Trump administration attempted to zero out the $73 million in federal money allotted to the program, but Congress refused to go along.

Four years ago, when he was running for governor of Maryland, Republican Larry Hogan

vehemently criticized a stormwater remediation fee, enacted in 2012 and designed to reduce the amount of runoff pollution headed into sewer systems and eventually the Chesapeake Bay. Hogan derisively called it a “rain tax.” But as studies began to show stormwater remediation promoting underwater grasses that help clean up the bay, Hogan changed his tune and came to support the program. The “rain tax,” coupled with other measures designed to eliminate runoff, has had a positive effect both environmentally and politically.

Finally, there are the five Great Lakes. Taken together, they form the largest surface freshwater system on the planet, hosting more than a fifth of the earth’s freshwater supply. Their combined watershed includes significant areas of Canada and eight U.S. states, plus more than half a dozen major metropolitan areas and about 40 tribal nations.

The watershed is vitally important in both the U.S. and Canada as a center for manufacturing and agriculture, as well as shipping. The structure for cooperation to protect it was established early on, in 1972, when President Richard Nixon and Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau signed a Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement defining specific areas that were threatened by pollution. In the ensuing years the agreement has been amended many times, most recently six years ago to address the frightening algae blooms in Lake Erie.

If you have ever flown over the southwestern tip of Lake Erie in summer, you will understand the concern: The entire lake surface is a mass of green algae. The most serious infestation came in 2011. Not long after that, the 1972 agreement was amended to deal with the algae problem.

The water pollution challenge to governments at all levels is daunting because it mixes intricate science with complicated politics. But the intergovernmental outcome generally has been positive. There is occasional friction, as when Michigan complains that Illinois isn’t doing enough to keep the invasive and dangerous Asian carp from entering its waters via the Chicago River. But the EPA regional offices have continued to be a positive force. That is vital. In the age of Trump, it also is highly uncertain.

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