

Highlights of [GAO-05-829](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The virtual elimination of toxic pollutants in the Great Lakes is a goal shared by the United States and Canada. While some progress has been made, pollution levels remain unacceptably high. The Great Lakes Initiative (GLI) requires stringent water quality standards for many pollutants in discharges regulated by states administering National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit programs.

As requested, this report examines the (1) GLI's focus and potential impact on water quality in the Great Lakes Basin, (2) status of GLI's adoption by the states and any challenges to achieving intended goals, and (3) steps taken by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for ensuring full and consistent implementation of GLI and for assessing progress toward achieving its goals.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that EPA take three actions to better ensure full and consistent implementation of GLI, including issuing a permitting strategy for a more consistent approach to controlling mercury and, resolve disagreements with the state of Wisconsin on GLI provisions.

EPA generally agreed with GAO's recommendations. It plans to work with the Great Lakes states in assessing approaches for reducing mercury in lieu of developing a mercury permitting strategy.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-829.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact John Stephenson at (202) 512-3841 or stephensonj@gao.gov.

GREAT LAKES INITIATIVE

EPA Needs to Better Ensure the Complete and Consistent Implementation of Water Quality Standards

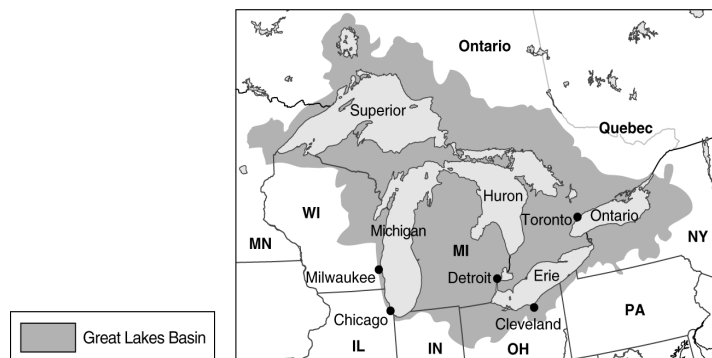
What GAO Found

GLI has limited potential to improve overall water quality in the Great Lakes Basin because it primarily focuses on regulated point sources of pollution, while nonpoint sources, such as air deposition and agricultural runoff, are greater sources of pollution. GLI's potential impact is further limited because it allows the use of flexible implementation procedures, such as variances, whereby facilities can discharge pollutants at levels exceeding stringent GLI water quality standards. Finally, many of the chemical pollutants regulated by GLI have already been restricted or banned by EPA and have a limited presence in point source discharges.

By 1998, the eight Great Lakes states had largely adopted GLI water quality standards and implementation procedures in their environmental regulations and NPDES programs. However, EPA determined that some states had failed to adopt some GLS provisions or had adopted provisions that were inconsistent with GLI and EPA promulgated rules imposing GLI standards. Wisconsin officials, however, believe that the state cannot implement standards that are not explicitly supported by state law, and disagreements with EPA over the rules remain unresolved. As a result, GLI has not been fully adopted or implemented in the state. Finally, a major challenge to fully achieving GLI's goals remains because methods for measuring many pollutants at the low levels established in GLI do not exist. Consequently, some pollutants cannot be regulated at these levels.

EPA has not ensured consistent GLI implementation by the states nor has the agency taken adequate steps toward measuring progress. For example, EPA did not issue a mercury permitting strategy to promote consistent approaches to the problems posed by mercury as it stated in GLI. In the absence of a strategy, states developed permits for mercury that vary from state to state. Attempts by EPA to assess GLI's impact have been limited because of inadequate data or information that has not been gathered for determining progress on dischargers' efforts to reduce pollutants.

Great Lakes Basin Area in the United States and Canada



Sources: GAO, MapArt.