



Protection of the Waters of the Great Lakes:

2025 REPORT ON WATER DIVERSIONS AND USES

Final Report

December 2025

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Foreword



IJC Commissioners (from left to right): Lance Yohe (US), Merrell-Ann Phare (Canada), Gerald H. Acker (US Co-Chair), Pierre Baril (Canadian Co-Chair), Susan Chiblow (Canada), and Robert Gioia (US). Photo taken July 16, 2025, in Ottawa, Canada.

In this 2025 Report, the International Joint Commission (IJC) reaffirms its enduring purpose: to prevent and resolve transboundary water disputes. Established by Canada and the United States under the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, the IJC serves as an impartial advisor and trusted convener that helps to advance the sustainable management of our shared waters through science-based collaboration and dialogue.

In fulfilling this role, the Commission recognizes that the long-term health of transboundary watersheds depends on strong partnerships with Indigenous Nations. Strengthening these relationships is not only a matter of respect and reciprocity, but also essential to effective governance. This report calls for deepened collaboration with Indigenous Nations, and for efforts to ensure that their perspectives are meaningfully included in decision-making processes.

This emphasis on collaboration and shared responsibility is gaining momentum across the region. We are encouraged by the leadership of the Mayors of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, who this year launched a historic Economic Transformation Action Plan to create a world-renowned Fresh Coast Economic Corridor. Their vision demonstrates that protecting and restoring the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin goes hand-in-hand with building sustainable prosperity for the 40 million people who depend on it. We also welcome the State of Michigan’s proclamation of October 22 as Great Lakes Public Trust Day, which affirms the principle that these waters are held in trust for the benefit of all people. This recognition underscores the growing regional commitment to legal and ethical frameworks that safeguard the Lakes for present and future generations.

We further note commitments expressed at the national level. In May 2025, the United States Government underscored its dedication to protecting the Great Lakes, “the world’s largest surface freshwater system, and a highly valued shipping avenue, resource for fishing and recreation, and source of high-quality drinking water”, through a Presidential Memorandum directing federal agencies to coordinate efforts against invasive carp. Similarly, Canada’s Minister of Foreign Affairs reaffirmed that “the protection of our water is of paramount importance to Canadians in all parts of the country” and emphasized that Canada’s freshwater is not only a natural resource but also a defining symbol of national identity and resilience in the face of climate pressures.

The Commission extends its sincere thanks to the many individuals and organizations who informed the development of this report. We are encouraged by the widespread support expressed for this study and for the broader goal of advancing sustainable water management in our shared waters. We also recognize the strong foundation provided by the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact and Agreement, and the important work of the Compact Council and Regional Body. This report is intended to complement—not duplicate—their efforts, by adding an independent, binational perspective that reinforces the shared commitment to protecting the watershed.

At the same time, we acknowledge that important concerns have been raised regarding emerging pressures such as the rapid growth of data centers and other high-demand industries that could affect water availability and ecosystem health. These contributions underscore both the urgency and the complexity of the task before us, and they will continue to guide the Commission’s work as we seek balanced, forward-looking solutions. It should be noted that similar water security concerns are expressed across the Canada-United States transboundary region, and the Commission stands ready to investigate them in coordination with both federal governments.

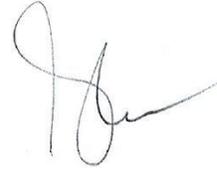
The Commission is committed to implementing Recommendation 16 from the consultants’ report on which this 2025 Report is based. The recommendation calls on the IJC to monitor climate variability, new and increased water uses, population trends, and emerging science on

an ongoing basis in preparation for the IJC's next 10-year review on water uses and diversions. In doing so, the IJC will work closely with its boards and partners to ensure that this monitoring reflects the best available knowledge.

Our mission is to ensure that shared waters remain healthy, abundant, and equitably managed for current and future generations. By anchoring decisions in shared facts and convening the right partners, the IJC is committed to strengthening how ecosystems and communities adapt and thrive in the face of change.



Commissioner Pierre Baril



Commissioner Gerald H. Acker



Commissioner Merrell-Ann Phare



Commissioner Lance Yohe



Commissioner Susan Chiblow



Commissioner Robert Gioia

Executive Summary

For more than 40 years, the IJC has examined how water is removed from, and used within the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River watershed. In 1999, through a formal request known as a “reference,” the governments of Canada and the United States asked the Commission “to examine into and report upon matters concerning the use of waters along our common border.” The reference letter emphasized that the Governments were “concerned that current management principles and conservation measures may be inadequate to ensure the future sustainable use of our shared waters,” and requested that the Commission “give first priority to an examination of the Great Lakes basin.” In response, the IJC released its *Protection of the Waters of the Great Lakes* report in 2000, which set out 12 recommendations on ecosystem needs, removals and diversions, consumptive use, cumulative impacts, conservation, trade, and data reporting.

The Commission followed up with reviews in 2004 and 2015, continuing to track progress and emerging challenges. Concurrently, the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers established the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact and the companion Sustainable Water Resources Agreement, creating a durable framework for the sustainable management of shared waters across jurisdictions.



Map of the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River watershed, illustrating major tributaries. Created by the IJC.

In 2025, the IJC tasked consultants from Canada and the United States to undertake a comprehensive literature review, conduct interviews with key stakeholders and subject-matter experts, and gather feedback during a one-month public comment period on draft findings. A draft consultants' report was released in July 2025 and revised later that year based on feedback received. The public comment period included both a public webinar and a by-invitation workshop with leading experts. The draft and revised versions of the consultants' report are accessible on the IJC website.

It should also be noted that some progress has been made in responding to the recommendations the IJC issued in 2015 as part of its first 10-year review, though several remain outstanding. This 2025 report sets out new recommendations that both replace and build upon those issued in 2015, ensuring continuity while addressing emerging challenges.

Recommendations:

- 1. It is recommended that the Great Lakes states and provinces maintain the Compact and Agreement in their current form at this time. Given this, the Great Lakes states and provinces should maintain a high level of awareness as water scarcity outside the basin and water demand within the basin strain available water resources. Further, the Compact Council and Regional Body should continue their policies of transparency to build public awareness of, and confidence in their processes.*
- 2. It is recommended that the Great Lakes states and provinces commit to greater collaboration with Indigenous Nations and engage Indigenous Nations to determine whether and how they would like to contribute to decision making under the Compact and Agreement. The Great Lakes states and provinces, the Compact Council and the Regional Body should continue their efforts to make meetings with Tribes and First Nations as effective as possible.*
- 3. It is recommended that, by the next IJC review, the Compact Council and Regional Body consider ways to more clearly acknowledge the distinct status of First Nations, Tribes, and Métis Peoples as rights holders, and recognize their interests, needs, knowledge systems, and governance institutions.*
- 4. It is recommended that, by the next IJC review, the Regional Body, in consultation with Indigenous Nations, identify and pursue options for greater participation in their meetings.*
- 5. It is recommended that, by the next IJC review, the Compact Council and Regional Body hold public engagement opportunities to help define "reasonable water supply alternative," "largely residential" and the "humanitarian exemption" and consider incorporating appropriate language in the guidance and rules of the Regional Body.*

6. *It is recommended that the Compact Council and Regional Body oversee continued improvements in hydrologic modeling and organize workshops and other fora to share knowledge and improve collaboration.*
7. *It is recommended that the federal governments, and the Great Lakes state and provincial governments, support advancements in the state of science on climate-related variation in hydrologic conditions in the Great Lakes through additional funding and synthesis of the state of the science.*
8. *It is recommended that, subject to available resources and the development of an education plan by the next IJC review, the Great Lakes states and provinces expand outreach—beyond diversion-specific engagement—to Indigenous communities and other interested parties, including businesses, local governments, and youth.*
9. *It is recommended that, by the next IJC review, the Great Lakes states and provinces establish a uniform methodology for reporting consumptive use by all jurisdictions.*
10. *It is recommended that, by the next IJC review, the Great Lakes states and provinces continue and strengthen research and monitoring of groundwater use and develop a groundwater plan.*
11. *It is recommended that the Compact Council and Regional Body review and, where appropriate, update the criteria for initiating interim cumulative impact assessments to ensure they reflect current scientific understanding and data capabilities. This review should incorporate recent advancements in groundwater science, monitoring, and water use data collection.*
12. *It is recommended that the Great Lakes states and provinces consider whether the Great Lakes Commission has the necessary resources to enhance and maintain data quality, availability and security.*
13. *It is recommended that the Compact Council and Regional Body renew their focus on strengthening water conservation and efficiency across the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River basin by providing clear guidance to ensure that state and provincial plans are both rigorous and actionable. Jurisdictions should be encouraged to review and update their plans to reflect current and emerging pressures on Basin water resources. The Compact Council and Regional Body should also promote transparent reporting and periodic evaluation to verify implementation and progress toward reducing overall consumptive use within the basin.*

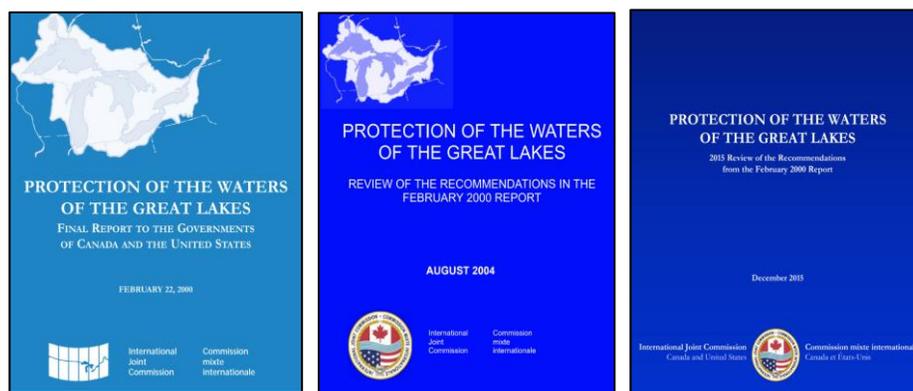
- 14. It is recommended that the Great Lakes states and provinces work together to develop a set of best practices for sustainable water use to be employed by or applied to operators of large-scale data centers. Among these practices should be a consistent methodology of accounting for and reporting to governments and the public the volumes of water withdrawn and consumed. Further, the states and provinces should, perhaps through the Regional Body, prepare a report on data centers that includes future scenarios for their cumulative impact on the Great Lakes and tributaries, including groundwater, with and without the application of best practices.*
- 15. It is recommended that the Great Lakes states and provinces jointly convene a panel of legal experts to assess how existing public trust principles can be more efficiently applied within the basin and to explore comparable approaches in Canada. The panel's work should consider how these doctrines could strengthen and complement the Compact and Agreement in addressing future or emerging stresses on the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin, with an opportunity for public input.*

1. Introduction

The IJC is a binational organization established by the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 to help the Governments of Canada and the United States prevent and resolve disputes over shared waters. The IJC reviews and approves projects that may affect the natural flow or level of boundary waters, regulates their operation when required, and provides impartial, science-based advice, at the request of both governments, on transboundary water and air quality issues.

Concerns over the use and diversion of Great Lakes water have persisted for decades. At the request of the Canadian and US governments, the Commission has periodically examined these issues and provided advice. In response to a 1999 request, or “Reference”, from the Governments of Canada and the US, the IJC released its first *Protection of the Waters of the Great Lakes report* in 2000. In its 2000 report, the IJC offered 12 recommendations on topics ranging from removals and consumptive use to conservation, trade, groundwater, climate change, and institutional coordination. The report also recommended an additional three-year review, followed by standing ten-year reviews. Both governments accepted the recommendation.

The IJC completed its first three-year review in 2004 and its first ten-year review in 2015. The 2015 review issued eight recommendations and highlighted major progress, particularly the adoption of the *Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact* and companion *Sustainable Water Resources Agreement*, developments the Commission described as “for the most part a good news story.”



This 2025 report marks the Commission’s second ten-year review. It builds on preliminary work by two independent consultants and incorporates public input gathered through a comment period, a webinar, and a workshop.

The sections that follow present a summary of the principal findings and outline the full set of recommendations. A more detailed account of the findings is available in the consultants’ report. The consultants’ report, along with the IJC’s previous reports on this topic, are available on the IJC website.

2. Key findings

Since the Compact came into effect in 2008, no new or increased diversions outside the basin have been approved beyond four in Wisconsin—New Berlin, Waukesha, Racine, and Somers—under limited exceptions in the Compact and Agreement to the general ban on diversions. The Waukesha diversion, the only “straddling county” case to undergo Regional Body and Compact Council review, was approved by Wisconsin in 2021 and began operation in October 2023 following extensive public consultation.

Annual water-use reporting under the Compact and Agreement continues through the Great Lakes Regional Water Use Database managed by the Great Lakes Commission. The net result for 2023 was a basin gain of approximately 5,100 MLD (1,350 MGD), largely due to the scale of the Long Lac and Ogoki diversions into the basin. Five-year cumulative impact assessments required by the Compact and Agreement indicate that consumptive uses and diversions remain small relative to total inflows, though refinement of groundwater and consumptive-use estimates would improve future assessments.

The voices gathered through written submissions, webinar dialogue, interviews and workshop discussions reinforced the central message that the Great Lakes are a shared and finite resource whose protection requires vigilance, innovation, and cooperation across borders. Participants broadly endorsed the recommendations in the consultants’ report while urging additional action in several key areas. They emphasized the need to preserve the Compact and Agreement while clarifying key terms, to embed Indigenous rights and governance in basin decision-making, and to anticipate and manage new pressures, particularly those arising from water-intensive industries. Strengthening science, monitoring, and climate preparedness was seen as essential, as was expanding education and public engagement to sustain long-term support. A *What We Heard* document summarizing public input on the draft consultants’ report is provided as Appendix 1.

3. Recommendations

In its assessment of the implementation of the 2015 recommendations, the IJC has found that the Compact and Agreement have been implemented effectively. States and provinces have strengthened statutes, imposed return flow conditions on approved diversions, and improved water use data collection and reporting. Institutional oversight by the Regional Body and Compact Council remains effective, and cumulative impact assessments have been pursued as required. The Science Team has emerged as a key forum for integrating new hydrological research, supporting progress on water balance components. However, challenges persist; these include inconsistent methods for estimating consumptive use and the lack of progress on a binational public trust framework.

Progress in areas such as climate resilience and groundwater management has also been uneven. While jurisdictions have begun incorporating resilience strategies and supporting climate science, climate change is addressed only indirectly through cumulative impact assessments. Groundwater research has advanced, particularly in the United States, and is now recognized as a priority in the Regional Body/Compact Council Science Strategy. Nonetheless, the ability to fully assess withdrawal impacts remains limited.

The following recommendations for 2025 are intended to build on areas of progress, address persistent gaps, and strengthen the long-term sustainability and resilience of the Great Lakes basin.

3.1 Maintaining the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact and Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River Basin Sustainable Water Resources Agreement

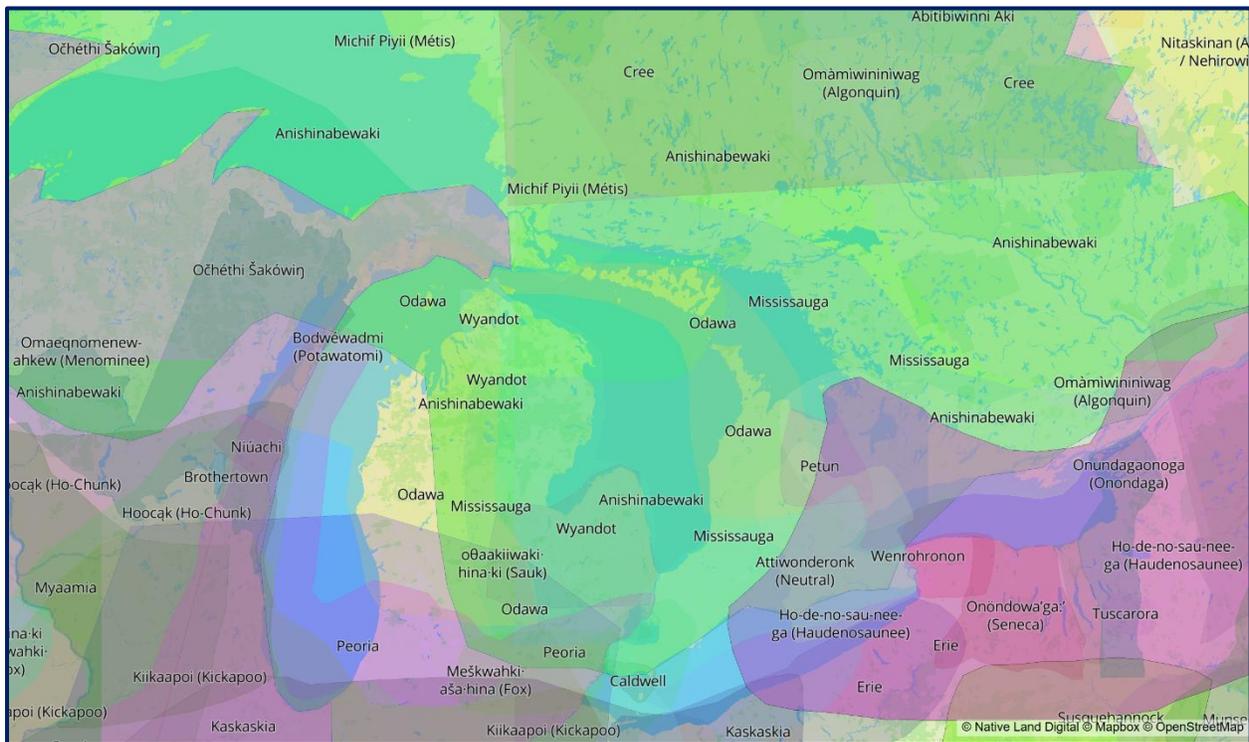
Based on its review of the Compact and Agreement, supported by the perspectives of most stakeholders and subject-matter experts interviewed, the IJC understands that no formal amendments to either agreement are warranted at this time. The IJC found no basis for changes arising from implementation experience since 2008. While acknowledging that neither document is without limitations, and that opportunities for improving implementation exist, the IJC concluded that such improvements can be pursued through adjustments to policies and procedures rather than through revisions to the agreements themselves.

Recommendation

- 1. It is recommended that the Great Lakes states and provinces maintain the Compact and Agreement in their current form at this time. Given this, the Great Lakes states and provinces should maintain a high level of awareness as water scarcity outside the basin and water demand within the basin strain available water resources. Further, the Compact Council and Regional Body should continue their policies of transparency to build public awareness of, and confidence in their processes.*

3.2 Strengthening Collaboration with Indigenous Nations

While Indigenous Nations are not formally recognized as sovereigns or rights holders in the Compact and Agreement and are not represented as members of the Compact Council or Regional Body, efforts to improve engagement and participation are underway. Strengthened involvement of Indigenous Nations could be pursued through mechanisms that do not involve changes to the Compact and Agreement and should be explored in consultation with them.



A representation of Indigenous traditional territories in and around the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River basin, reflecting the complex and dynamic relationships Indigenous Peoples have with the land. Please note that the map does not represent or intend to represent official or legal boundaries of any Indigenous nations. © Native Land Digital. Used with permission. www.native-land.ca

Recommendations

- 2. It is recommended that the Great Lakes states and provinces commit to greater collaboration with Indigenous Nations, and engage Indigenous Nations to determine whether and how they would like to contribute to decision making under the Compact and Agreement. The Compact Council and the Regional Body should continue their efforts to make meetings with Tribes and First Nations as effective as possible.*
- 3. It is recommended that, by the next IJC review, the Compact Council and Regional Body consider ways to more clearly acknowledge the distinct status of First Nations, Tribes, and Métis Peoples as rights holders, and recognize their interests, needs, knowledge systems, and governance institutions.*
- 4. It is recommended that, by the next IJC review, the Regional Body, in consultation with Indigenous Nations, identify and pursue options for greater participation in their meetings.*

3.3 Clarifying Compact Definitions

The review process for the diversions authorized since 2015 has highlighted ambiguities in key definitions within the Compact and Agreement, which in some cases led to public debate over the permissibility of the approvals. To strengthen decision-making and build public confidence, further public engagement on these definitions would be beneficial.

Specific areas of ambiguity include the interpretation of “reasonable water supply alternative,” as raised in the Waukesha diversion, which prompted questions about the types of alternatives applicants must consider. The Racine diversion brought attention to the definition of “largely residential,” particularly in cases where commercial uses are involved and how that should be measured. Additionally, the Compact’s exemption for “short-term humanitarian needs” lacks clarity, with the terms “short-term” and “humanitarian” remaining undefined.

Recommendation

- 5. It is recommended that, by the next IJC review, the Compact Council and Regional Body hold public engagement opportunities to help define “reasonable water supply alternative,” “largely residential” and the “humanitarian exemption” and consider incorporating appropriate language in the guidance and rules of the Regional Body.*

3.4 Understanding Climate-related Variation in Hydrologic Conditions

Scientific evidence points to ongoing and potentially intensifying changes in precipitation patterns, evaporation rates, drought, and flooding—all of which have implications for water withdrawal and diversion decisions. A centralized data repository with climate-related information, building on existing tools like the Great Lakes Observing System, could support jurisdictions in tracking future conditions, assessing impacts, and advancing efforts to mitigate impacts.

Recommendations

- 6. It is recommended that the Compact Council and Regional Body oversee continued improvements in hydrologic modeling and organize workshops and other fora to share knowledge and improve collaboration.*
- 7. It is recommended that the federal governments, and the Great Lakes state and provincial governments, support advancements in the state of science on climate-related variation in hydrologic conditions in the Great Lakes through additional funding and synthesis of the state of the science.*

3.5 Increasing Public Education Regarding the Existence and Purpose of Compact and Agreement

Public awareness of the significance of the Compact and Agreement remains limited. Public interest tends to be event-driven, often surfacing in response to proposed diversions. Targeted outreach to specific demographic groups could foster more meaningful engagement.

Recommendation

- 8. It is recommended that, subject to available resources and the development of an education plan by the next IJC review, the Great Lakes states and provinces expand outreach—beyond diversion-specific engagement—to Indigenous communities and other interested parties, including businesses, local governments, and youth.*

3.6 Improving Water Use Data Collection, Analysis, and Reporting

Consumptive use is the portion of withdrawn water that does not return to the basin. Because direct measurements are rare, agencies estimate it using coefficients, which introduces uncertainty. The 2016–2020 Cumulative Impact Assessment by the Compact Council and Regional Body found that better methods and more consistent use of coefficients are needed. The IJC agrees that improving accuracy and consistency is essential for sound water-management decisions.

Since 2015, jurisdictions have strengthened water-use data collection, reporting, and compatibility. As data quality improves, the criteria for cumulative impact assessments may need updating to reflect the best available science and emerging water-use patterns, including new industries and groundwater withdrawals. The Great Lakes Commission remains well-positioned to serve as the central repository for this information through its online data system.

Recommendations

- 9. It is recommended that, by the next IJC review, the Great Lakes states and provinces establish a uniform methodology for reporting consumptive use by all jurisdictions.*
- 10. It is recommended that, by the next IJC review, the Great Lakes states and provinces continue and strengthen research and monitoring of groundwater use and develop a groundwater plan.*
- 11. It is recommended that the Compact Council and Regional Body review and, where appropriate, update the criteria for initiating interim cumulative impact assessments to ensure they reflect current scientific understanding and data capabilities. This review should incorporate recent advancements in groundwater science, monitoring, and water use data collection.*

12. *It is recommended that the Great Lakes states and provinces consider whether the Great Lakes Commission has the necessary resources to enhance and maintain data quality, availability and security.*

3.7 Water Efficiency and Conservation Plans

The IJC recognizes that the efficient use and conservation of water, along with the development and implementation of robust plans, are essential to upholding the spirit and intent of the Compact and Agreement. However, feedback gathered through consultations suggests that conservation and efficiency plans mandated for Great Lakes states and provinces are not consistently driving new initiatives in all jurisdictions. This signals a need for renewed attention and action.

A hopeful sign is that the Economic Transformation Action Plan, released by the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence Cities Initiative on September 25, 2025, includes a commitment to preventing an overall increase in consumptive uses of water, even as it seeks to attract significant economic growth over the next decade. The IJC views this as a promising step and urges jurisdictions to align their water efficiency and conservation efforts with this goal to ensure long-term sustainability of the basin’s water resources.

Recommendation

13. *It is recommended that the Compact Council and Regional Body renew their focus on strengthening water conservation and efficiency across the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River basin by providing clear guidance to ensure that state and provincial plans are both rigorous and actionable. Jurisdictions should be encouraged to review and update their plans to reflect current and emerging pressures on basin water resources. The Compact Council and Regional Body should also promote transparent reporting and periodic evaluation to verify implementation and progress toward reducing overall consumptive use within the basin.*

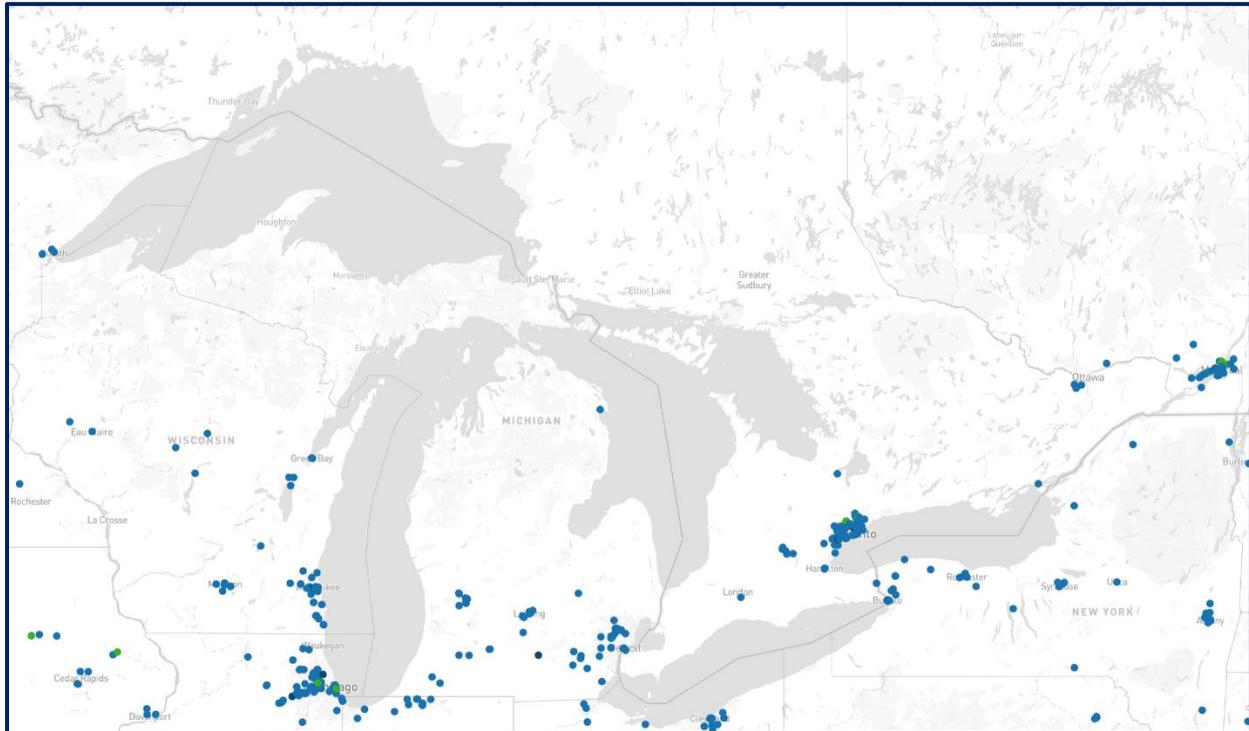
3.8 Addressing New Pressures

Many knowledge holders anticipate growing pressure for large-scale diversions of Great Lakes water outside the basin within the next decade. While views on the likelihood vary, there is broad hope that the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact and Agreement will remain strong enough to address such proposals. Among the most significant emerging threats are artificial intelligence (AI) and data centers, which are both energy- and water-intensive.

The rapid expansion of hyperscale data centers, driven by AI, cloud computing, and cryptomining, poses serious risks to water availability and ecosystem health. These facilities

can consume millions of gallons of water daily for cooling, with most of it lost to the local ecosystem.

The growing water demand from data centers may impact groundwater supplies, stream flows, and wetlands, with consequences for both local and basin-wide hydrology. To mitigate these risks, developers should adopt innovative water-saving technologies such as closed-loop cooling, immersion cooling, and the use of non-potable water sources. The Great Lakes states and provinces are encouraged to apply the precautionary approach, acting proactively even in the absence of full scientific certainty, to safeguard the ecosystem and public welfare from potential harm.



A representation of the distribution of data centers in and around the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River basin as of November 2025. © Data Center Map. Used with permission. www.datacentermap.com

Recommendation

14. It is recommended that the Great Lakes states and provinces work together to develop a set of best practices for sustainable water use to be employed by or applied to operators of large-scale data centers. Among these practices should be a consistent methodology of accounting for and reporting to governments and the public the volumes of water withdrawn and consumed. Further, the states and provinces should, perhaps through the Regional Body, prepare a report on data centers that includes future scenarios for their cumulative impact on the Great Lakes and tributaries, including groundwater, with and without the application of best practices.

3.9 Public Trust

The Compact and Agreement affirm that the waters of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin are a shared public trust, with states and provinces bearing a collective duty to protect and conserve them. This aligns with public trust principles in both U.S. and Canadian law, which recognize the public's enduring right to access and safeguard navigable waters.

The potential for invoking the public trust doctrine by the eight Great Lakes states and comparable legal principles in the two Canadian Great Lakes provinces should be examined and implemented, where feasible, as they may play a valuable role in serving as a backstop to the Compact and Agreement.

Recommendation

15. It is recommended that the Great Lakes states and provinces jointly convene a panel of legal experts to assess how existing public trust principles can be more efficiently applied within the basin and to explore comparable approaches in Canada. The panel's work should consider how these doctrines could strengthen and complement the Compact and Agreement in addressing future or emerging stresses on the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin, with an opportunity for public input.

4. Conclusion

The waters of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin form the foundation of life and prosperity for more than 40 million people, as well as for the ecosystems that depend on them.

This 2025 review reaffirms that the Compact and Agreement remain durable and effective frameworks for protecting these shared waters, while also highlighting areas where vigilance, innovation, and collaboration are urgently needed.

The Commission's recommendations reflect a broad set of priorities: strengthening collaboration with Indigenous Nations, clarifying key terms, advancing science and monitoring, and preparing for emerging pressures such as climate variability, groundwater stress, and water-intensive industries. Each recommendation is important to ensuring that the Compact and Agreement continue to function as living instruments, capable of adapting to new challenges without compromising their core protections.

The IJC is also committed to implementing Recommendation 16 of the consultants' report, which calls for ongoing monitoring of climate variability, new and increased water uses, population trends, and emerging science in preparation for the next 10-year review.

Looking ahead, the IJC will communicate these findings and recommendations directly with the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers, as well as with the Compact Council, Regional Body, Indigenous Nations, and other partners. These discussions will focus on identifying opportunities for collaboration, and ensuring that the region is collectively prepared to safeguard the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin for future generations.

The IJC remains committed to its role as an impartial, binational advisor. By working collectively across jurisdictions, sectors, and generations, we can ensure that the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin remains resilient and sustainably managed now and in the future.

Appendix 1 – What We Heard Report:

Summary of Public Input on the Draft 2025 Protection of the Waters of the Great Lakes Report

Introduction

The International Joint Commission (IJC) received a wide range of perspectives on the draft 2025 Protection of the Waters of the Great Lakes consultants' report. During the one-month comment period, the IJC gathered comments through written submissions, and a public webinar. It also gathered input through a by-invitation workshop with key stakeholders and subject-matter experts. The Commission received over two dozen written submissions and numerous comments during the live sessions. Respondents included non-governmental organizations, municipal agencies, academic experts, Indigenous representatives, and private citizens from both countries.

This What We Heard Report appendix summarizes common themes. It reflects the diversity of concerns raised, without attributing comments to individuals or organizations. Across submissions, there was broad support for the continued importance of the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact and Agreement, and for the IJC's role in monitoring, advising, and safeguarding the waters of the basin. At the same time, participants urged the IJC and governments to strengthen protections against emerging pressures, improve transparency, deepen Indigenous participation, and expand public engagement.

Theme 1: Protecting the Compact and Agreement

Participants expressed strong consensus that the Compact and Agreement remain vital safeguards for the basin. Most agreed that no changes should be made to their core text at this time, warning that opening negotiations could jeopardize hard-won protections. Instead, clarification of definitions, such as “reasonable water supply alternative,” “largely residential,” and “humanitarian exception”, was encouraged through guidance or appendices.

There was support for continued vigilance against large-scale diversions and withdrawals. Specific concern was raised about water-intensive industries such as chip manufacturing, AI, and data centers. Many urged proactive planning to evaluate cumulative impacts and ensure criteria are transparent and enforceable. Some called for thresholds that capture significant, but sub-regional, withdrawals, which may otherwise escape review.

Theme 2: Indigenous Rights, Roles, and Knowledge

A clear and repeated message was that Indigenous Nations are rights-holders, not stakeholders, and must be recognized and represented accordingly. Participants pointed to deficiencies in the current governance structure, where Indigenous Nations are not formally represented on the Compact Council or the Regional Body.

Many submissions urged governments to create space for formal Indigenous membership, consultation, and decision-making, including regular dialogue before Council meetings. Respondents also recommended incorporating Indigenous law, governance institutions, and traditional ecological knowledge into management frameworks.

Some emphasized that engagement must move beyond symbolic recognition to meaningful influence, supported by resources that enable participation. Reference was made to Canada's adoption of United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and to the IJC's own commitment to Indigenous engagement, as guideposts for advancing this work.

Theme 3: Emerging Pressures and Risks

Participants consistently identified a range of new and intensifying pressures on the waters of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin. Expanding demands from Artificial Intelligence (AI), data centers, and other high-tech industries were highlighted as a growing concern, alongside ongoing threats from invasive species such as sea lamprey. Risks associated with pipelines, oil transport, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and other “forever chemicals”; agricultural runoff, and industrial pollutants were also noted. Participants also raised concerns about the commodification and privatization of water, including bottled water sales and international trade.

Respondents urged governments to consult experts, require disclosure of industrial water and energy use, and adopt efficiency standards. Many emphasized the importance of transparency, stressing that non-disclosure agreements between industries and local governments can obscure the true extent of consumption. There was also strong interest in advancing the Public Trust Doctrine as a binational backstop framework to ensure water is protected for both current and future generations. While the IJC has recognized the doctrine in past reports, several participants observed that progress on its implementation has been limited.

Theme 4: Science, Data, and Climate Readiness

Comments consistently supported strengthening the science and monitoring base for Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin water management. Participants emphasized the need for standardized and consistent reporting of water use and consumptive use across jurisdictions. They also highlighted the importance of expanded monitoring and planning for groundwater, including mapping stressed aquifers, as well as improving the integration of surface and groundwater science in impact assessments. Another priority identified was securing funding and coordination for climate modeling to better project precipitation, evaporation, water levels, and associated socio-economic impacts.

Respondents encouraged governments to leverage existing networks such as the Great Lakes Commission, the Great Lakes Observing System, and local watershed groups, while also investing in new data platforms and local monitoring efforts. They stressed that science should be open, accessible, and harmonized across the basin to ensure effective and coordinated decision-making.

Theme 5: Public Awareness, Education, and Engagement

Across many submissions, participants called for much stronger public-facing education and engagement. While technical reports are important, they are often inaccessible to the general public. Respondents emphasized the value of using multimedia tools such as videos, graphics, audio, and social media to communicate findings in ways that are engaging and easier to understand. They also stressed the importance of building education into schools and aquariums to help young people appreciate the basin's scale, value, and vulnerabilities. Many noted the need to highlight the connections between water, wildlife, and community well-being, as well as to ensure transparent and accessible public notification processes for diversion proposals. Education was described as essential not only for fostering public understanding but also for building long-term support for the Compact and the Agreement.

Conclusion

The perspectives gathered through written submissions, webinar dialogue, and workshop discussions reinforced the central message that the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin is a shared and finite resource whose protection requires vigilance, innovation, and cooperation across borders. Participants broadly endorsed the IJC's draft recommendations while urging additional action in several key areas. They emphasized the need to maintain the Compact and Agreement while clarifying key terms, to embed Indigenous rights and governance in basin decision-making, and to anticipate and manage new pressures, particularly those arising from water-intensive industries. Strengthening science, monitoring, and climate preparedness was seen as essential, as was expanding education and public engagement to sustain long-term support.



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