

GREAT LAKES
ST. LAWRENCE
GOVERNORS
& PREMIERS



BIENNIAL REPORT

2024 - 2025



Introduction

The Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors & Premiers (GSGP) work together to grow the region's economy and protect our unique natural resources.

The past two years brought new challenges and new opportunities. **We deepened our longstanding commitment to managing our shared waters, boosting international trade, supporting fisheries, growing the regional maritime sector, and promoting tourism to the region.** GSGP also launched a new program focused on tree planting.

The Great Lakes St. Lawrence region is already a great place to live, play, and do business. With an **\$8 trillion (US) economy to grow and 21% of the world's surface freshwater to protect**, GSGP's program areas build on our region's strengths and aim to improve the environment, economy, and quality of life. By continuing to work together across borders, we are making a better tomorrow for everyone in our region.

In the following pages, we highlight these efforts, our initiatives, and the progress we have made together, including:

- The Maritime initiative continues to explore new fuel options and autonomous technologies to enhance the future of shipping
- The 100% Great Lakes Fish initiative won a major award and continues to innovate
- The newly launched Great Lakes Trees initiative aided in more than 27 million trees being planted in its first year – great progress toward reaching 250 million trees by 2033
- Tourism to the region set record highs and we welcomed new cruise ships to the Great Lakes
- The International Trade initiative led trade missions to ten countries in 2024-2025
- The Governors' and Premiers' Aquatic Invasive Species Task Force continues its work to prevent the spread of 21 high-risk, aquatic invaders including the invasive carp

In 2025, we also **welcomed newly elected Indiana Governor Mike Braun** to the GSGP Board. A special thanks to him and my fellow Governors and Premiers, including our Vice Chair, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, for their shared leadership.

We also **congratulate GSGP Executive Director, David Naftzger, and International Trade Program Director, Zoë Munro, who recently celebrated their 20th anniversaries with GSGP!**

Dave is the longest serving Executive Director in GSGP's history, working with nine different Governors during their Chairmanship. He helped oversee the development, passage, and implementation of the Great Lakes Compact and Agreement; and, Dave spearheaded the launch of several new programs including the popular 100% Great Lakes Fish program.

Zoë has grown the network of GSGP's foreign offices to 16, covering 135 countries. These offices complete more than 750 projects per year, facilitating more than \$200 million (US) in annual export sales. She has also led 40 trade missions to 28 different countries.

Congratulations to Dave and Zoë on 20 years of Great Lakes leadership. The Great Lakes are better because of your efforts.

Finally, a huge **thank you to our partners across the region** for their steady presence in helping us achieve these accomplishments. We look forward to the road ahead.



Gretchen Whitmer

Governor of Michigan, GSGP Chair



Great Lakes St. Lawrence River Maritime Initiative



John Schmidt presents GSGP's maritime decarbonization work.

Now in its 12th year, the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Maritime Initiative remains at the center of GSGP's efforts to strengthen regional economic competitiveness. Our shared vision—to double maritime trade, reduce the environmental footprint of transportation, and support the industrial heart of the region—continues to guide our work and inspire growing international collaboration.

2024 and 2025 marked major progress on several key initiatives. In particular, **the new Soo Lock – a critical investment for the region's industrial core – is on schedule for completion in 2030.** This progress follows years of advocacy and funding coordination from our region's Governors and other maritime stakeholders.

Expanding maritime fuel options remains a priority for growth. GSGP partnered with the International Council on Clean Transportation and American Bureau of Shipping to advance a U.S. Maritime Administration-funded fuel innovation roadmap for the region. This work included foundational research on marine biofuels, in addition to other work on vessel electrification, and charts a course toward providing more maritime fuel options that are viable and scalable for the region's fleets.

Smart shipping is another emerging area of innovation. From increased search-and-rescue capabilities to enhanced navigation and safety systems, these tools help operators modernize and adapt to future demands. As part of this work, GSGP partnered with Michigan Technological University and Ocean Infinity to host a demonstration of an autonomous surface vessel on Lake Superior. **GSGP now administers the region's Smart Ships Coalition to support the integration of autonomous and digital technologies across the maritime sector.**

We built on longstanding relationships with regional stakeholders and the Port of Antwerp-Bruges to host a delegation visit to our region, showcasing opportunities for transatlantic trade and efficiency-aligned logistics. In Washington D.C., GSGP and the Regional Maritime Entity hosted meetings with federal government leaders to elevate the region's infrastructure, technology, and workforce priorities.

As regional and global trade landscapes evolve, GSGP's maritime work continues to reflect a strong commitment to innovation, operational readiness, and economic opportunity.

An autonomous surface vessel demonstration in Houghton, Michigan.



100% Great Lakes Fish



GSGP's David Naftzger accepts the Seafood Industry Climate Award.

Now in its third year, the **100% Great Lakes Fish initiative continues to lead the way in creating a new vision for sustainable fisheries in our region.** Inspired by Iceland's whole-fish model, GSGP's initiative is transforming the way we think about fish harvests—from waste to opportunity.

In March of 2025, **the initiative was honored with the Seafood Industry Climate Award** presented by the Acme Smoked Fish Foundation for excellence in advancing climate-conscious seafood innovation. The award recognizes GSGP's work to develop high-value, low-waste solutions in our region.

Furthermore, momentum is building for this initiative: **42 companies have signed GSGP's 100% Fish Pledge**, affirming their commitment to supporting full fish utilization, local supply chains, and regional economies. As part of this, **GSGP, with support from our partners, completed the first biotechnical analyses of six species**—including Lake Whitefish, Yellow Perch, Lake Trout, Walleye,

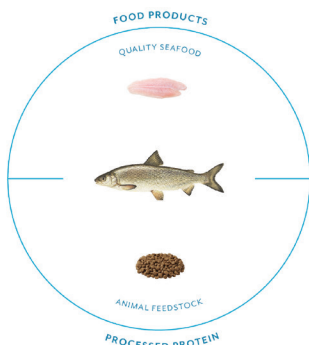
White Sucker, and Cisco—identifying a wide range of valuable uses for parts of the fish that are often discarded.

Prototyping efforts advanced significantly, with early-stage development of collagen, protein hydrolysates, and fish leather, along with scoping of additional product lines. These innovations form the foundation of a regional strategy for new fish value chains—**one that supports rural economies, reduces waste, and elevates the role of freshwater fish in climate-aligned food systems.**

GSGP has secured nearly \$600,000 in funding for this work, thanks to generous support from the Great Lakes Fishery Trust, Great Lakes Fishery Commission, Acme Smoked Fish Foundation, and the Ontario Commercial Fisheries' Association.

With partners across science, business, and policy, the 100% Great Lakes Fish initiative is showing what's possible when innovation meets collaboration.

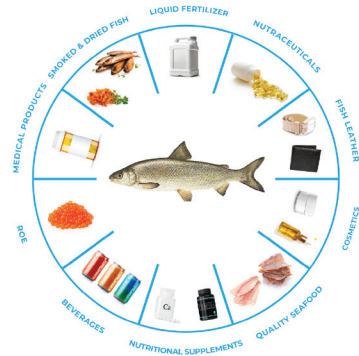
From yesterday...



To today...

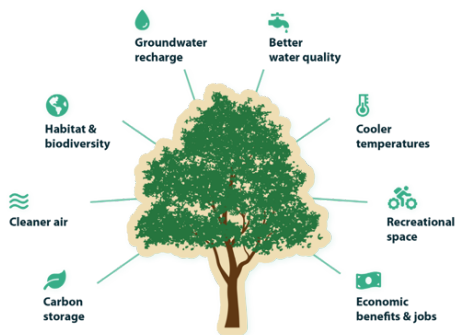


To tomorrow...





Former Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb and GSGP's Mike Piskur plant a tree at the Indiana State Capitol.



Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers speaks at the 2025 NFL Draft tree planting event.

Great Lakes St. Lawrence Trees Initiative

The Great Lakes St. Lawrence Trees Initiative is GSGP's regional effort to plant 250 million trees by 2033. Launched in October of 2023, more than **27 million trees** were planted across the region last year.

We are working with our Supporting Partners to organize high-profile tree planting events. In April of 2025, GSGP teamed up with Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers, NFL Green, Verizon, and the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin to plant 90 trees in Green Bay for the 2025 NFL Draft. On Arbor Day in 2024, we joined (now former) Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb at the Indiana State Capitol, to celebrate the one millionth tree planted under his leadership. We also partnered with Consumers Energy to plant 72 trees in Zilwaukee, Michigan, among other projects.

In addition to planting trees, **another priority is focusing on how to maximize the health benefits of trees and planting trees in neighborhoods that need more tree canopy.** With support from the Cleveland Foundation, GSGP teamed up with the Cleveland Clinic and the Cleveland Tree Coalition to plant 32 trees in Cleveland's St. Clair Superior neighborhood. As part of this partnership, GSGP also created an infographic in multiple languages that highlights the connections and benefits between trees and health. For example, research shows that spending just 30 minutes a day outside near trees can improve mental health, strengthen heart health, and even reduce surgery recovery time for people of all ages.

Another part of the Trees Initiative is **Great Lakes Green Events, connecting conferences, corporate meetings, and other events with tree planting projects in that local community.** In its first 18 months, GSGP partnered with government agencies, corporations, and NGOs on 16 Green Events, planting nearly 2,500 trees across the region. Over the next 20 years, these trees will sequester approximately 215,000 pounds of carbon dioxide equivalent, capture more than 3.2 million gallons of stormwater, and remove 550 pounds of air pollutants.

Tourism

Tourism continues to be a powerful economic driver for our region. **Through Cruise the Great Lakes (CTGL) and Great Lakes USA (GLUSA), GSGP is working to elevate the region's global profile, promote travel, and create economic benefits.**

Regional cruising is on a long-term growth trajectory. In 2025, **Great Lakes cruising is projected to break records**, with more than 22,000 individual cruise passengers, over 700 port visits, and an estimated economic impact of \$230 million (US)—a nearly 15% increase over 2024. With its smaller ships, rich shore excursions, and unique ability to visit both U.S. and Canadian ports, Great Lakes cruising continues to provide an intimate and enriching experience for travelers. The region is expected to **welcome eight ships from six different cruise lines**, including the return of Victory Cruise Lines in 2025.

To raise awareness and build relationships, CTGL hosted regional media events, including successful gatherings in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, and Thunder Bay, Ontario. CTGL's commitment to responsible tourism remains strong. CTGL continues to promote its Sustainability Pledge, encouraging socially responsible cruising.

GLUSA, GSGP's flagship international tourism marketing initiative, also made key strides in 2024-25. GLUSA's Board of Directors adopted a new strategic plan to guide the program's growth, focused on market expansion, digital tools, and trade engagement. **This year, GLUSA also released a new promotional brochure, launched development of a travel trade portal and corresponding media campaign, and began exploring other new ways to reach potential visitors.**

As cruising reaches new heights and international promotion intensifies, GSGP remains focused on **fostering a tourism economy that is welcoming, sustainable, and deeply rooted in the distinct beauty and heritage of our region.** Through strategic partnerships and a shared vision, we are receiving more visitors than ever—and ensuring their experiences contribute to lasting regional prosperity.



Wisconsin Tourism Secretary and Cruise the Great Lakes Chair, Anne Sayers, addressing media at the 2025 GSGP Tourism Annual Meeting.



GSGP's John Schmidt addressing the press during a Cruise the Great Lakes media event in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

International Trade



GSGP Trade Mission delegates at the Rebuild Ukraine Show in Poland.



GSGP State and Provincial Trade Directors in Québec City.

The Governors' and Premiers' international trade initiative continues to play a pivotal role in helping regional companies expand their global footprint and increase international sales.

During the last two years, the GSGP trade office network—comprising 16 offices across 185 countries—**successfully completed over 1,200 projects**. These projects included market research, partner searches, and the coordination of business-to-business meetings, all tailored to support companies in the region.

From 2016-2024, the trade office network has facilitated an impressive \$2.45 billion (US) in international sales for companies from our region.

In 2024-25, GSGP led trade missions to 10 countries across four continents, expanding its trade mission footprint to Spain, Portugal, the Philippines and Morocco—marking the first time the initiative reached these countries—as well as to Poland, Brazil, Chile, Vietnam, South Korea and Japan. These missions showcased companies from diverse sectors such as consumer goods, agriculture, automotive, aerospace, construction, marine, and medical technology. For the first time, **GSGP also hosted a trade show booth for our region at the Rebuild Ukraine Show in Poland.**

In May 2024, GSGP convened a strategic meeting of the State and Provincial International Trade Directors in Québec City. The gathering focused on advancing regional collaboration on trade, investment, and best practices.

Water Management

GSGP continued its integral role in the governance and stewardship of the waters of the Great Lakes St. Lawrence River Basin.

As Secretariat to the Governors' and Premiers' Regional Body and the Governors' Compact Council, **GSGP continues to ensure the steady implementation of the Great Lakes Compact and Agreement.** The Regional Body/Compact Council's Science Strategy is an important driver for coordinated scientific research and serves as a policy statement on the most important research needed to ensure the long-term availability of water to the region.

The water management program also focuses on involving indigenous communities and local community leaders to ensure that regional planning includes their needs and voices. Additionally, GSGP is working internationally to learn from others and to show how transboundary water governance in our region can serve as a model. In the fall of 2024, GSGP staff attended the 10th Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes held in Ljubljana, Slovenia. GSGP continues to look for other opportunities to showcase the Governors' and Premiers' leadership on this important issue.

Overall, **GSGP assists the States and Provinces in meeting Agreement/Compact deadlines, including the development and submission of annual water use data and program assessments for water conservation and efficiency.** As we move forward, GSGP remains committed to the wise use and management of our shared water resources, upholding the region's economic and environmental well-being.



Peter Johnson manages GSGP's regional water management program.



GSGP's Peter Johnson and David Naftzger at the 2024 United Nations Water Convention meeting.

Governors' and Premiers' Aquatic Invasive Species Task Force

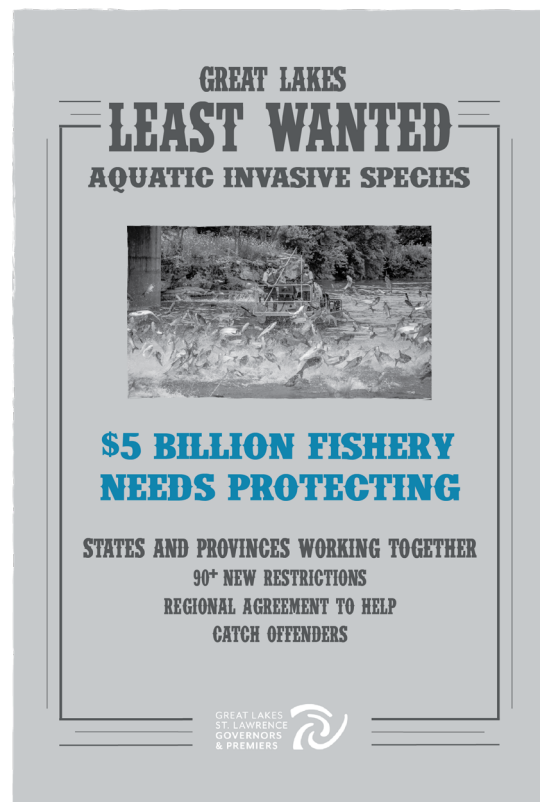


Invasive carp leap from the water in the Illinois River.

GSGP continues to spearhead action to protect our region from aquatic invasive species (AIS). The collaborative actions of GSGP's AIS Task Force have fortified defenses and increased the region's ability to address this ongoing challenge.

The Task Force works to stop the spread of the 21 "least wanted" AIS, as identified by the Governors and Premiers. Since 2013, the States and Provinces have taken more than 90 separate actions against high-risk species, including invasive carp.

Building on progress made by the States of Illinois and Michigan, the Governors and Premiers continue to advocate for full federal funding for the new Brandon Road Lock and Dam System, which would provide even greater protection against AIS.



The "least wanted" list of AIS drives regional action against high-risk species.

Media Highlights

Deal to stop Great Lakes water diversion has worked for 15 years

Detroit Public Radio

By Pat Batcheller | December 12, 2023

He [Marc Smith of the National Wildlife Federation] says governors of Great Lakes states viewed this [water diversions] as a threat to the region's economy and environment. Officials in Ontario and Québec agreed. They joined those states in drafting the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Agreement. Today, it's called the Great Lakes Compact.

"We have a lot of fresh water, so that was the impetus for getting all the governors and premiers together to form a regime that would protect the Great Lakes now and into the future," Smith said.

In 2008, President George W. Bush signed the compact into law. Since then, Smith says the agreement has shown how states can work together to manage their water resources.

From Iceland to Illinois and the Great Lakes Region – 100% Fish

Outdoor Illinois

Article By: GSGP's David Naftzger | February 1, 2024

The 100% Fish initiative is the first of its kind in the Great Lakes region.....the 100% Fish initiative fits perfectly with regional goals in supporting historical, sustainable and profitable fisheries in the lakes.

The next EV revolution could happen on the water, Great Lakes group says

The Detroit News

By Carol Thompson | April 13, 2024

The Great Lakes Governors and Premiers issued a report in July that examines the potential for powering the region's ferries with electricity. There are 127 ferries operating on the Great Lakes, taking passengers to destinations such as Harsens Island, Beaver Island and Mackinac Island or across Lake Michigan.

The Great Lakes Governors and Premiers hope to launch a pilot project someday to demonstrate what it would take to convert a fossil fuel-powered ferry to electricity. They plan to work with a publicly owned ferry.

Holcomb, nature allies celebrate planting 1 million trees

Indiana Capital Chronicle

By: Leslie Bonilla Muñoz | April 28, 2024

In October, the leaders of eight states and two Canadian provinces — including Indiana's Holcomb — launched a campaign to plant an additional 250 million trees by 2033. All are part of the Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers (GSGP).

Holcomb is term-limited, with eight gubernatorial candidates hoping to succeed him. But Bortner said the change in leadership wouldn't jeopardize the new, higher goal.

Indiana's next governor, he noted, will be part of the regional group leading the charge.

Commercial fisheries in the Great Lakes borrow an idea to help revive their industry

NPR Morning Edition

June 4, 2024 | Interview with David Naftzger

He (Dave Naftzger) heads an intergovernmental organization that's behind an effort to get the Great Lakes commercial fishery to use 100% of each fish caught.

DAVE NAFTZGER: Our fishery has for decades, maybe centuries, not really truly been a fishery but rather a fillet production industry.

WANSCHURA: The current value of an average Great Lakes whitefish is around \$15. Naftzger thinks it's realistic to double, even triple that amount in the next several years by using more of each fish. He hopes the Great Lakes fishery can find the same success that a group called the Iceland Ocean Cluster has. So he traveled thousands of miles to meet the founder.

Hope in the Water

PBS TV Show | Hope in the Water | Changing the Menu | Episode 3

Aired on PBS: July 3, 2024

The PBS TV show Hope in the Water, narrated by Shailene Woodley, highlights the work GSGP is doing with the Iceland Ocean Cluster on 100% Fish. GSGP's David Naftzger

makes an appearance, along with the Cluster's Alexandra Leeper and Thor Sigfusson.

Iceland has changed the Cod fish from being nearly 2/3 wasted to utilizing more than 90%. The episode demonstrates some of the potential to turn fish parts into profitable collagen, bandages, power drinks, and more.

[Watch it here.](#)

Note: The video of invasive fish jumping is NOT from Lake Michigan. That is what we are working hard to prevent in Lake Michigan and the Great Lakes through GSGP's AIS initiatives.

What happened to a plane that disappeared in 1968 over Lake Superior? A robot may unravel the mystery.

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

By: Caitlin Looby | September 9, 2024

The mission is being led by the Smart Ships Coalition, an organization of industry, government and academic partners interested in advancing technology in the Great Lakes region. The coalition plans on Monday to launch the Armada 8, a robotic ship made by Ocean Infinity, a marine robotics company based in Texas. The robotic ship is about 26 feet long and weighs 10,000 pounds.

Over the course of a week, it will scan a 20-square-mile area of Lake Superior using multi-beam sonar.

The [Associated Press](#) and other news organizations covered this mission extensively.

Smith: 100% Fish initiative strives to increase utilization of Great Lakes whitefish

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

By Paul A. Smith | September 29, 2024

The project, run by the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers (GSGP), got its start in Oct. 2022. The GSGP "unites the chief executives from Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Ontario, Pennsylvania, Québec and Wisconsin to work as equal partners to grow the region's nearly \$8 trillion economy and protect the world's largest system of surface fresh water" according to its mission statement.

"Our campaign strategy holds tremendous promise for the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence region to more completely utilize caught fish, drive greater economic returns, create jobs and help develop rural economies," said David Naftzger, GSGP executive director. "We're just getting started and feel this is just the tip of the iceberg."

US Great Lakes Cruise Industry Expected to Achieve Unprecedented Growth with Two Hundred Thirty USD Million Economic Impact, Powering Milwaukee's Expansion

Travel and Tour World

March 19, 2025

According to experts from Cruise the Great Lakes, the economic impact of the cruising industry on the region is expected to exceed \$230 million in 2025. This is a significant jump, reflecting a 15% increase from the previous year, 2024, as the industry continues to rebound and expand. The growing popularity of the Great Lakes as a cruising destination has not only spurred a surge in tourism but also provided a much-needed boost to local economies in the area.

The projected \$230 million economic impact comes from several sources, including passenger spending, port fees, and related services such as hotels, restaurants, transportation, and excursions.

NFL Kicks Off Draft Week with Tree Planting at Oneida Nation

Seehafer News

By Ryan Brahm | April 22, 2025

Governor Evers shared his appreciation for the NFL highlighting the need for trees to be planted, especially since he is a part of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers, which recently launched the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Trees Initiative.

Evers said the program has "the ambitious goal to plant 250 million trees by 2033. This is a regional effort not just here in Wisconsin, but it builds upon our Wisconsin goal to plant 100 million trees by 2031 as part of the Trillion Trees Initiative."

Husband and wife team 'speak the same message' in marketing U.S. dry beans

Ag Week

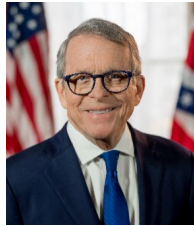
By: Noah Fish | April 25, 2025

This past November, the Hackers were part of a market development and trade mission trip to Spain, Portugal, and Morocco with the Great Lakes & St. Lawrence Governors & Premiers, on behalf of Northarvest Bean Growers Association. In Spain and Portugal, the group met with buyers who were already buying the types of beans that Bonanza Bean supplies to the industry, Hacker said.

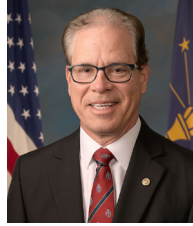
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Thank you

A special thanks to our partners and project funders for their continuing support and ongoing commitment to creating a better future for the entire region.

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