EPA urged to protect the Great Lakes

As Congress stalls, staff pushes EPA to lead

For more than a year, big polluters and their cronies in Congress have blocked legislation to restore the Clean Water Act. With action at a standstill on Capitol Hill, Environment Ohio is pushing the Environmental Protection Agency to step in and restore full protections to the streams and wetlands that feed the Great Lakes.

Recent Supreme Court decisions have weakened the Clean Water Act and called into question whether or not more than half of Ohio's streams, including waters upstream that feed the Great Lakes, are still protected. Without these protections, polluters can dump waste with impunity. Ultimately, the lakes pay the price.

And it's a price the Great Lakes can ill afford to pay—theirs waters already suffer from excess pollution and sewage runoff. According to a report we released with our allies last summer, polluters dumped more than 24 billion gallons of sewage and other toxics into Lake Erie alone in 2008. Contaminated beach water can make swimmers vulnerable to a host of waterborne illnesses, including stomach flu, skin rashes, hepatitis, neurological disorders and other serious health problems.

Restoring protection

As the health of the Lakes continues to worsen, it's more important than ever that our leaders in Washington, D.C., find a way to rise above the fray and restore the Clean Water Act. But with no congressional action in sight, our staff and members are pushing the EPA to get involved.

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson is currently considering a new clean water initiative, saying that the EPA would "consider administrative action to restore the Clean Water Act protections to wetlands and headwater streams that provide clean water for human and ecological uses."

But with the new Republican majority in Congress itching to hamstring the EPA, and well-connected polluters lobbying against strong protections, the EPA needs all the public support we can muster. We've banded together with our sister groups across the country to rally thousands of people nationwide to send the EPA a message: Americans want support strong protections for our waters.
Once again, the political winds have shifted. New faces are in power in Washington, D.C., and here in Columbus.

Yet when it comes to Ohio’s environment, the challenges and opportunities we face remain the same. We’re doing a better job of keeping polluters from dumping into Lake Erie, but we need stronger protections. We’re building on our work to help Ohioans put solar panels on their rooftops, but we need to make sure we’re building homes to use energy better in the first place. We have tremendous potential to rebuild Ohio’s economy on clean energy, yet the policies that can make it happen are being challenged.

Regardless of who’s up and who’s down in Columbus and Washington, we have our work cut out for us. Thanks to your support, we’re ready to meet the challenge.

Sincerely,

Julian Boggs
Program Associate

Solar jobs on the rise in Ohio
The solar industry is growing. According to a report by the Solar Foundation and Green LMI Consulting, the industry employs roughly 93,000 workers in the county. Employment figures for solar power have nearly doubled in the last year, and are expected to grow another 26 percent in the coming 12 months—at a time when overall employment is only expected to grow 2 percent.

In Ohio, there are now 48 different solar companies helping to fuel this rise in jobs. A 50-megawatt solar array is being built in Zanesville which is expected to create 600 jobs and provide energy for more than 25,000 homes. At a time when many companies and whole sectors were slowing down, this report shows that the solar industry really came off the bench to deliver a slam dunk for our economy and our environment.

Big storms, the new norm?
The heavy rains that fell over the Midwest and Canada in the aftermath of 2008’s Hurricane Ike caused one of the costliest flooding events in Ohio’s history. Scientists project that global warming could affect the frequency and severity of such extreme weather events in the coming decades. For example, a 2002 study of the potential for “great floods” in river basins worldwide projected that the Ohio River would be more than twice as likely to experience a 100-year flood if carbon dioxide levels continue increasing at an alarming rate.

Environment Ohio’s recent report, “Global Warming and Extreme Weather” explains that the extreme weather events we’ve seen of late may be a taste of the new normal if we experience the worst effects of global warming.

We’re using the findings of the report to push our lawmakers to reduce the pollution that causes global warming. That means taking first steps, like introducing stronger efficiency standards for appliances and buildings, as well as launching larger-scale efforts to increase the amount of electricity we generate from the sun and the wind.
Report: As park visits rise, funds are being cut

Boating at Lake Logan. Exploring Dead Man's Cave. Hiking at Hocking Hills State Park. No matter what your favorite activity, the Hocking Hills region is a favorite place for Ohio families to hike, camp and explore nature. It’s a place where the next generation of Ohioans can experience the Buckeye State just the way their parents did, and Environment Ohio is working in 2011 to make sure it stays that way.

But even as the number of visitors to Ohio’s state parks is on the rise, our state parks are on the table for budget cuts in the coming year—leaving them with fewer resources for maintenance, upkeep and stewardship.

“Last year, visitors poured into Ohio’s favorite parks to go hiking, camping and canoeing,” said Environment Ohio's Craig Willert. “Yet just as their popularity grows, they are under threat from underfunding.”

Growing popularity

Ohio’s parks, such as the Hocking Hills, have taken on renewed importance for Ohioans as the recession squeezes family vacation budgets. Thousands of Ohioans flock to the Hocking Hills each year, supporting a $180 million tourism industry. But the Ohio Department of Natural Resources continues to face budget shortages. The park relies on state funds to hire park rangers, keep park facilities and trails properly maintained, and pay for popular programs like camping—budget cuts will make it even harder for park stewards to keep the park in good shape or even open to the public.

In fact, ODNR Director Sean Logan said in December that any further cuts would make keeping all the parks open “unsustainable.” And yet, Governor-elect John Kasich has maintained that as far as cuts go, “everything is on the table.” Including our state parks.

“How is the time to protect these great places,” said Willert. “Instead, they face painful cuts which could delay maintenance, lead to fewer rangers being hired, or even shut down some parks.”

Shrinking budget

The threats confronting Ohio’s parks are also being replicated around the country. Environment Ohio’s report, “The Best of America,” revealed that nationwide, two-thirds of national parks saw their visitorship climb in 2009, including parks in nearly every state. However, almost three-quarters of these increasingly popular parks are facing budget cuts in 2011.

“Just like the Hocking Hills, parks throughout America are becoming more popular destinations,” said Willert. “They offer families affordable vacations and are ideal places for people of all ages to explore the great outdoors. We need to give our parks the resources to ensure that they are just as majestic in 2999 as they were in 2009.” This winter and spring, Environment Ohio will be a presence at the Statehouse, representing our state parks, standing up for the Hocking Hills and all of our favorite places. We know it’s going to be a season of hard choices for lawmakers, but one thing they shouldn’t consider is any reduction in funding that would further harm the Hocking Hills.

With the Obama administration considering a new round of fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks as millions of us took to the road last Thanksgiving, Alex Wall, an associate with Environment Ohio’s Washington, D.C., office, got to wondering: How much money would Americans save if we drove ultra-efficient cars that traveled 60 miles per gallon, instead of the current 26.4 mpg average?

After crunching the numbers, Alex came up with an answer: A cool $234 million. That’s enough money to put another few million pumpkin pies on holiday tables.

And that’s just one more reason—along with our desire to help get Ohio off oil and reduce our state’s carbon footprint—that Environment Ohio is joining the members of our national federation and nine governors in calling for new government rules that will ensure that by 2025 the average car sold in the United States will go 60 miles per gallon.
None of us want to see another oil spill. But wouldn’t drilling for oil generate more income than our beaches ever could?

It turns out the reverse is true. According to our research, clean beaches inject $4 into the economy for every $1 that could be earned from offshore drilling. “Our research makes it clear that clean beaches and oceans are worth much more than drilling for the last drops of oil off our coasts,” said Federal Oceans Advocate Mike Gravitz.

Gravitz has testified before the president’s Oil Spill Commission three times, urging the administration to abandon plans to expand offshore drilling up the Atlantic coast. And thanks to our Gumbo for the Gulf fundraisers, he was able to fly four Gulf business-owners and one fisherman to Washington to lobby decision-makers against new drilling. We won a big victory in December when the Obama administration announced it would not allow drilling off the Atlantic coast for at least the next five years.