**Learner, Gade: Donald Trump's puzzling war on the Great Lakes**

**Howard A. Learner and Mary Gade**7:00 a.m. ET May 15, 2017

President Donald Trump won the 2016 election in Wisconsin and several Great Lakes states, but his Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt is assaulting Great Lakes protection and restoration. Slashing funding for the sensible Great Lakes Restoration Initiative from $300 million annually to $0. Rolling back Clean Water Act standards that protect safe, clean drinking water. Potentially closing the U.S. EPA’s Region 5 office in Chicago, which includes the Great Lakes National Program Office, and transferring its staff to Kansas.

What are they thinking? This is a headscratcher, criticized by both Republican and Democratic leaders. Pruitt says he wants to get “back to basics.” What could be more basic than protecting the Great Lakes?

The Great Lakes are a global gem. They contain the planet’s largest fresh water supply (21%), provide drinking water for 42 million people, provide a rich aquatic habitat and ecosystem, support a $7 billion annual fishing industry, and offer lakefront and recreational opportunities for millions of people.

The Great Lakes are our great natural treasure. Military analysts say future wars will be fought over fresh water. Milwaukeeans and all Cheeseheads, Chicagoans, Hoosiers, Michiganders, Minnesotans and Ohioans recognize this remarkable liquid gold. We can’t afford to mess it up. Why put this at risk?

First, the Trump administration’s proposed fiscal year 2018 budget apparently would eliminate funding for the successful Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, Gov. Scott Walker and other bipartisan leaders are urging Trump to reverse course. They understand voters’ strong support for the Great Lakes.

The short stopgap FY 2017 budget approved by Congress continues this Great Lakes program at the full $300 million. The administration’s FY 2018 budget (starting Oct. 1) does not.

ADVERTISING

This is a practical program that has supported 3,000 projects to keep the lakes clean, preserve shorelines, restore wetlands and protect safe clean drinking water. For example:

* Projects to reduce harmful invasive species and algae blooms in Lake Michigan and clean up decades-old pollution.
* A multi-year, $25 million project to remove PCBs and petroleum contaminants from the Milwaukee River near Lincoln Park in Glendale.
* Projects to remove toxic PCBs and heavy metals impairing the Kinnickinnic, Menomonee and Milwaukee Rivers and nearshore Lake Michigan.
* EPA scientists crisscross the lakes in the Lake Guardian and Mudpuppy research vessels, gathering water and air quality monitoring data essential for determining safe drinking water supplies and potential health risks that warrant beach closures, and to help assure that cryptosporidium never again harms Milwaukeeans.

Second, Pruitt is rushing to roll back clean water standards that protect safe drinking water and preserve fish and wildlife habitat. The Environmental Law & Policy Center commissioned 12 focus groups of Trump voters in Indiana, Michigan and Ohio. While they didn’t like regulatory paperwork, these voters solidly support regulations to protect safe clean water as common sense.

They understand that pollution upstream or next door can contaminate their drinking water. They like swimming in clean lakes and enjoy playing on nice beaches. Some remember when raw industrial sewage polluted our lakes before the Clean Water Act was passed and implemented. They didn’t vote for a rollback.

Third, the Trump administration’s rumored plans to close the U.S. EPA Region 5 Office in Chicago are tone deaf and foolish. The EPA’s national Great Lakes Program and experienced staff are in Chicago. The reported plan would transfer staff to the Region 7 Office in Lenexa, Kansas, as the new center for EPA’s Great Lakes protection work and team.

When the Enbridge pipeline broke and spilled oil into the Kalamazoo River, would EPA’s emergency team have responded more quickly from Lenexa, Kansas, than from Chicago? Will Kansas-based staff better deal with algae blooms in Green Bay and Lake Erie and contaminated drinking water in East Chicago, Flint, Kewaunee and Manitowoc Counties and Toledo?

The administration suggests that consolidating Chicago’s Region 5 office into Kansas’ Region 7 office will save some coin. That’s penny-wise and pound-foolish, just like the flawed choice to seek short-term cost savings that resulted in the Flint contaminated water tragedy.

Good policy is good politics. This shortsighted attack on the Great Lakes and safe clean drinking water is bad policy. The public and most political leaders know better. The battle for Great Lakes protection is well worth fighting and winning, but this battle shouldn’t have to be fought. President Trump, it’s time to step back and reconsider.

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