

In a competitive, purpose-driven marketplace, ignoring water risks is not an option. By prioritizing water stewardship, businesses unlock strategic value, reduce costs, mitigate risks, and strengthen stakeholder trust. Lead boldly and turn vulnerabilities into opportunities for growth.

Water stewardship is more than a sustainability initiative; it is a cornerstone of corporate resilience and reputation. Companies signal leadership, integrity, and long-term vision by taking decisive action to manage water responsibly. These qualities resonate deeply with customers, investors, and employees in an era where climate volatility and resource constraints demand proactive solutions. Leading on genuine water stewardship strategies can elevate your brand and position your organization as a trusted innovator in a purpose-driven marketplace.



## A Business Imperative for the Great Lakes

Corporate water stewardship is entering a new era. It recognizes water as a shared, finite resource and calls for responsible use that is socially equitable, environmentally sustainable, and economically resilient. In the Great Lakes, where climate volatility, aging infrastructure, and growing industrial demand are reshaping water availability, stewardship is no longer optional. Risks across the Great Lakes basin, such as quality degradation, stormwater surges, shifting hydrology, and governance gaps, extend beyond the boundaries of individual facilities. Water stewardship is fundamental to long-term business stability and regional well-being.

## Water Stewardship as a Business Strategy

Traditional approaches to water management focused on internal efficiency goals which no longer match the scale of basin challenges. Modern stewardship requires a shift in mindset and practice.



Treat water as a shared resource, understanding that operational decisions must align with basin hydrology, climate trends, and local priorities.



Prioritize transparency and accountability, creating credible reporting and shared data systems that are essential to building investor trust and improving basin outcomes.



Integrate water with climate, nature, and biodiversity goals with recognition that water cannot be separated from climate resilience, habitat health, community well-being, or long-term economic value.



Support collective governance with multi-stakeholder efforts, such as CGLR's Great Lakes Water Innovation and Stewardship Exchange (WISE), that accelerate basin-wide solutions by connecting utilities, industry, municipal leaders, and NGOs.

Meaningful progress requires businesses to engage beyond the fence line and co-invest in resilient freshwater systems.

# Business Benefits of Water Stewardship

Water stewardship is a strategic investment that delivers measurable benefits across the organization, workforce, community, and brand, including:

## 1. Employee Engagement & Retention



**Engagement:** Employees feel empowered, driving higher engagement scores.

**Retention:** Corporate responsibility fosters trust and loyalty, reducing turnover costs.

**Talent Attraction:** Publicly showcasing stewardship differentiates the company and appeals to purpose-driven talent.

## 2. Community Relations & Social License



**Active Engagement:** Initiatives like river cleanups, stormwater projects, and water donations build trust.

**Benefits:** Strong relationships ease permitting, enable collaboration, and may unlock incentives.

**Impact:** Community goodwill enhances brand loyalty and operational flexibility.

## 3. Reputational Advantage



**Brand Strength:** Stewardship signals leadership to customers, suppliers, community and stakeholders.

**Product Connection:** Linking water savings to products boosts perceived value.

**Credibility:** Third-party validation amplifies trust.

## 4. Quantifiable Outcomes



**Metrics:** Engagement scores vs. retention costs; community engagement vs. operational efficiency.

**Reputation Indices:** Track correlation with revenue growth and brand equity.

**The Bottom Line:** Water stewardship drives profitability and resilience.

# How Businesses Can Lead in the Great Lakes

## 1. Move from Efficiency to Basin Impact

Improve internal water efficiency while anchoring stewardship efforts to the watersheds that your operations and supply chains rely on. Invest in nature-based solutions, stormwater infiltration, floodplain reconnection, and riparian restoration to reduce operational risk and improve ecological function at scale.

## 2. Set Context-Based Water Targets

Develop targets that reflect local hydrology, water stress, climate projections, regulatory conditions, and community needs. Generic “water positive” or volumetric-only goals overlook the basin-specific realities that shape business risk.

## 3. Engage in Collective Governance

Join multi-sector collaborations with municipalities, Indigenous Nations, water authorities, utilities, and NGOs. Shared risks require co-designed and co-funded solutions, particularly in basins facing stormwater surges, aging infrastructure, or groundwater strain.

## 4. Invest in Shared Watershed Resilience

Partner with watershed councils, conservation districts, Tribal and First Nations stewardship groups, and municipal stormwater programs. High-impact investments include:

- Wetland restoration
- Permeable infrastructure
- Riparian buffers
- Nutrient reduction strategies
- Urban stormwater retrofit

These projects offer dual value: operational risk reduction and measurable basin improvement.

## 5. Report Transparently & Demonstrate Progress

Use GRI 303, CDP Water Security, SBTN Water Targets, AWS or WAVE verification, and TNFD-aligned disclosures to communicate performance and risk exposure. Highlight basin outcomes, not just corporate metrics.



# Navigating Water Stewardship

Businesses face growing pressure to manage water responsibly across operations and supply chains. Effective water stewardship delivers risk mitigation, resilience, and reputational value. Success depends on three pillars:

- **Strategic Partners:** Engage with leading organizations for expertise, collaboration, and verification.
- **Standards & Frameworks:** Adopt globally-recognized guidelines to ensure credible governance and reporting.
- **Decision-Support Tools:** Use tools to assess risk, prioritize actions, and quantify benefits.

Aligning with standards, leveraging partners, and applying data-driven tools position companies as sustainability leaders while safeguarding shared water resources.

## A Simple Path to Water Stewardship

1. Assess basin risks across operations and supply chains.
2. Set science-based targets and context-based goals that reflect local watershed needs.
3. Act with partners through shared restoration and resilience projects.
4. Report transparently using frameworks, such as WAVE: Water Stewardship Verified; Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS); CDP Water (formerly Carbon Disclosure Project); and Global Reporting Initiative (GRI).

# Navigating Water Stewardship: Frameworks & Tools

## Frameworks Guiding Water Stewardship

Framework	Description
Alliance for Water Stewardship Standard	The leading global framework for site-level and basin-level water stewardship. It guides companies through a structured, stakeholder-inclusive process to improve water governance, water balance, water quality, important water-related areas, and WASH access. AWS certification provides credible verification recognized by investors, regulators, and NGOs.
WAVE: Water Stewardship Verified	An enterprise-level program helping companies assess water risks, strengthen governance, and build credible water stewardship roadmaps across operations and supply chains. WAVE verification demonstrates that a company has a comprehensive, baselined, and prioritized water strategy aligned with global best practices.
Net Positive Water Impact	An ambition supported by the CEO Water Mandate and WRC, which encourages companies to ensure their contributions to a healthy basin exceed their negative impacts, particularly in water-stressed areas.
GRI 303: Water and Effluents	A global reporting standard that guides transparent disclosure of water withdrawals, discharges, and impacts across operations. Helps companies demonstrate responsible water management and builds trust with investors, regulators, and communities.
EcoVadis	A global sustainability ratings platform that helps companies manage ESG risk and compliance, improve sustainability performance, and drive impact across their value chains.
CDP Water Security Disclosure	A widely recognized reporting platform that evaluates how companies assess, manage, and mitigate water-related risks. CDP scores provide visibility into corporate preparedness and influence investor decision-making.
Water Resilience Coalition Framework	A corporate action platform under the CEO Mandate that supports companies in developing and implementing basin-level targets and participating in collective watershed restoration initiatives to advance Net Positive Water Impact outcomes.
Science Based Targets for Nature (SBTN) – Freshwater Pathway	Provides science-aligned guidance for identifying water dependencies and impacts, prioritizing basins, and setting context-based freshwater targets across operations and supply chains. Highly relevant for companies building basin-aligned water strategies.

TCFD/TNFD Water-Related Disclosures	Climate (TCFD) and nature (TNFD) reporting frameworks increasingly require companies to disclose water-related physical, transition, and systemic risks. Both are becoming key expectations for investors and regulators.
ISO 14046 – Water Footprint Assessment	International standard that supports quantification and reporting of water use impacts across a product, process, or organization. Useful for supply-chain-heavy sectors.

## Available Decision-Support Tools for Water Stewardship

Tools	Description
WWF Water Risk Filter	A basin-level risk assessment platform that evaluates physical, regulatory, and reputational water risks under current and future climate scenarios. Includes scenario planning modules and sector-specific guidance.
WRI Aqueduct Water Risk Atlas	A widely used global database and mapping tool for identifying regions facing water stress, drought risk, flood exposure, and projected future hydrologic change. Useful for facility siting, procurement strategy, and value chain screening.
Volumetric Water Benefit Accounting	A standardized method for quantifying the volumetric water benefits of stewardship actions, such as reuse, restoration, efficiency, or green infrastructure. Complements Water Quality Benefit Accounting (WQBA) and WASH Benefits Accounting to capture quality and accessibility outcomes.
Smart Water Navigator	A user-friendly platform that helps companies assess water risk, benchmark site performance, and build context-based water stewardship plans. Supports goal-setting, investment decisions, and internal prioritization.
Water Risk Monetizer	A decision-support tool developed by Ecolab and Microsoft that quantifies the true business value of water risk, incorporating local scarcity, quality impacts, and financial exposure. Supports capital planning and resilience investment justification.

## Call to Action

### Commit to Frameworks



- Approve adoption of recognized frameworks for credible site-level and basin-level performance.
- Endorse alignment with frameworks to meet investor and regulatory expectations.

### Invest in Decision-Support Tools



- Allocate resources for Smart Water Navigator and Water Risk Monetizer to quantify risk and ROI.
- Integrate WWF Water Risk Filter and WRI Aqueduct into enterprise risk management for proactive planning.

### Champion Strategic Partnerships



- Engage with the Council of the Great Lakes Region and get involved in Great Lakes WISE for regional leadership and collaboration.
- Collaborate with groups like The Water Council, CEO Water Mandate, and WWF to strengthen governance and collective action.

### Embed Stewardship in Corporate Strategy



- Mandate water stewardship goals in sustainability and supply chain strategies.
- Require reporting of measurable benefits using Volumetric Water Benefit Accounting.

### Lead Through Transparency and Influence



- Approve public disclosure of water stewardship progress in sustainability reports and digital channels.
- Position the company as an industry leader in water resilience and community engagement.

