

Embedding water stewardship policies into governance structures ensures accountability, consistency, and long-term impact. By integrating clear standards and oversight into decision-making, companies can align leadership priorities, mitigate risk, and drive enterprise-wide sustainability performance. Acting now positions your organization as a model of responsible governance and strategic foresight.

Great Lakes Policies

The Great Lakes are governed by a complex system of U.S., Canadian, Tribal/First Nations, state, and provincial policies. Foundational agreements, such as the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA) and the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact, have long protected the region from major diversions, pollution, and uncoordinated development. Binational oversight from the International Joint Commission (IJC) further supports monitoring, accountability, and shared decision-making.

Existing governing frameworks were shaped by past conditions and offer valuable platforms for future progress. Today, climate variability, aging infrastructure, emerging contaminants, and new industrial water demands are outpacing existing regulations. Fragmented enforcement and uneven state/provincial policies make basin-wide planning difficult.

Policy-Relevant Stressors Affecting the Great Lakes

Despite strong agreements, the Great Lakes continue to face stressors that stretch the limits of current policies and enforcement systems.

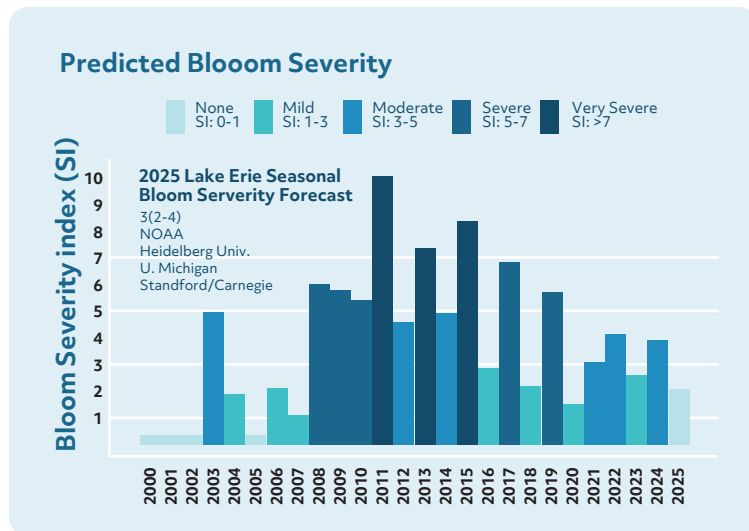
Persistent Stressors

- ❖ Toxic and legacy contaminants driving costly cleanup programs and new regulatory expectations.
- ❖ Invasive species and habitat loss threatening restoration and monitoring efforts.
- ❖ Emerging contaminants (PFAS, pharmaceuticals, microplastics) that move faster than regulatory updates.
- ❖ Combined sewer overflows (CSOs) from aging infrastructure and severe storms.
- ❖ Nutrient pollution and harmful algal blooms (HABs), underscored by events like the 2014 Toledo Drinking Water Crisis (considered a moderate year according to NOAA's Predicted Bloom Severity Index).

On the Horizon: Emerging Policy Pressures

- ❖ Climate volatility increasing drought, flooding, and variable lake levels.
- ❖ Water-intensive industries (data centers, EV/battery manufacturing, food processing) escalating local demand and scrutiny.
- ❖ Aging infrastructure and affordability challenges putting utilities and compliance at risk.
- ❖ Energy–water nexus impacts, including thermal discharges and high cooling-water use.
- ❖ Uneven binational policy evolution, creating coordination gaps across jurisdictions.

These pressures reveal where policies remain strong, and where they are increasingly insufficient. The region will need modernized regulations, harmonized standards, and active corporate participation to keep pace with future water challenges.



"Predicted Harmful Algal Bloom Severity in Lake Erie for 2025, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration"

Where to Start?

1. Scale Corporate Stewardship Beyond Individual Projects

Many companies engage in voluntary water initiatives, but basin-wide conditions require far broader action. Businesses can lead by integrating water risk into core strategy, supporting basin priorities, and accelerating change across their supply chains.

2. Champion Modern, Effective Water Governance

The most impactful business actions lie outside the facility boundary. Companies can support policy reforms that improve water allocation, regulate land use, strengthen monitoring, and protect ecosystems. Strong governance across jurisdictions ensures long-term water security, operational certainty, and economic stability.

3. Invest in Cross-Sector Collaboration and Shared Data

Water challenges overlap with climate, agriculture, energy, transportation, and land development. Businesses can amplify their impact by joining basin partnerships, supporting shared monitoring networks, and working with governments, utilities, and Indigenous nations on watershed priorities.

4. Support Consistent, Enforced Policy Frameworks

Uneven enforcement creates uncertainty and undermines progress. Businesses benefit from clear, harmonized, well-enforced regulations that create a level playing field and reduce compliance risk.

Water Stewardship for Resilient Futures

- ❖ **Integrate Water Risk into Core Strategy**
Move beyond site-level projects—embed water stewardship into corporate governance, supply chains, and investment decisions.
- ❖ **Champion Modern Water Governance**
Advocate for policy reforms that strengthen allocation, monitoring, and ecosystem protection across jurisdictions.
- ❖ **Invest in Cross-Sector Collaboration**
Join basin partnerships, share data, and work with governments, utilities, and Indigenous nations to address interconnected water challenges.
- ❖ **Support Harmonized, Enforced Regulations**
Push for consistent, well-enforced policies that reduce compliance risk and create a level playing field for all stakeholders.
- ❖ **Accelerate Innovation for Emerging Threats**
Fund solutions for PFAS, microplastics, and aging infrastructure to stay ahead of regulatory and operational risks.
- ❖ **Prepare for Climate and Industrial Pressures**
Incorporate climate volatility and water-intensive industry trends into long-term planning and resilience strategies.

