

# Advanced Stewardship



COUNCIL OF THE GREAT LAKES REGION  
Solving for Sustainability

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

Water stewardship faces escalating challenges globally and regionally, including biodiversity loss, water scarcity, pollution, climate impacts, and infrastructure stress. Addressing these complex, shared water challenges requires innovative, collaborative, and measurable approaches that operate at multiple scales—from local catchments to global sectors.



## Insights from the Great Lakes

The Great Lakes region exemplifies the complexity of water stewardship, with pressures from climate change, population growth, industrial and agricultural water use, and emerging contaminants like PFAS and microplastics. Despite strong binational governance frameworks, water quality and quantity challenges persist. Corporate stewardship efforts focus on best management practices, water efficiency, reuse, and circular economy principles. Addressing data gaps, upgrading aging infrastructure, and fostering cross-sector partnerships are essential to build resilience and sustainability.

Freshwater ecosystems are in crisis, with biodiversity declining, driven by climate instability, water scarcity, and pollution. These trends underscore the urgent need for systemic solutions that go beyond isolated efforts. Traditional siloed approaches cannot address the complexity of shared water challenges, which require coordinated, science-based strategies to restore ecological health and secure water resources for people and nature. Advanced water stewardship combines collective action, multi-stakeholder collaboration at catchment scale, with robust measurement frameworks to ensure accountability and impact.



## Collective Action as a Foundation for Scale and Impact

Collective action, which is coordinated engagement among diverse stakeholders, is critical to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6 on freshwater. Effective collective action requires trust, inclusive governance, clear roles, and alignment with formal water governance. Mapping high-opportunity catchments globally enables prioritization of efforts. New funding and governance models, such as catchment basket funds and a river system model of fund aggregation and redistribution, are proposed to enhance sustainability and scale. Conveners, often NGOs, must overcome competition by embracing transparent, multi-organizational collaboration.

## Accelerate Water Stewardship

### Collaborate at Scale

Unite water stewardship actors beyond organizational boundaries to implement collective action in priority catchments, leveraging shared governance and innovative funding models.

### Invest in Data and Infrastructure

Strengthen monitoring systems, close critical data gaps, and modernize infrastructure to enable adaptive, evidence-based water management.

### Adopt Measurable Practices

Apply credible frameworks such as VWBA 2.0 to ensure water stewardship activities deliver quantifiable benefits aligned with catchment needs and corporate commitments.

### Engage Broad Stakeholders

Include Indigenous peoples, local communities, governments, businesses, and NGOs in transparent, inclusive decision-making to build trust and shared ownership.

## VWBA Supports Collective Action Benefits

Volumetric Water Benefit Accounting (VWBA) has emerged as a global best practice for quantifying and claiming water benefits. VWBA provides a standardized, scientifically defensible method to measure outputs such as groundwater recharge, reduced withdrawals, improved water quality, and enhanced habitat conditions. By linking corporate water goals to catchment-level outcomes, VWBA enables organizations to credibly demonstrate progress toward replenishment and resilience targets while supporting biodiversity recovery. When integrated with collective action platforms and innovative financing models, VWBA ensures that interventions deliver measurable hydrological benefits and contribute to reversing ecosystem decline. Together, these approaches create a pathway for scaling water stewardship that is transparent, collaborative, and aligned with global sustainability objectives, and nature-positive commitments.

