

**THE DISTRICT ROLE
IN DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING
REMEDIAL ACTION PLANS**

FOR

AREAS OF CONCERN IN THE GREAT LAKES BASIN

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS**

1994

BACKGROUND

The Great Lakes are an important resource to the U.S. and Canada. They provide 20 million people with their water supply, serve as the base for a large industrial complex, and serve as the world's largest inland water transportation system.

These uses, however, have not been without effect on the lakes and their ecosystem. Pollution from a wide range of industrial uses and continued growth have created massive water quality and ecosystem degradation problems which have been documented since the early 1900s.

Concern for the degradation led to designation by the International Joint Commission's (IJC) Great Lakes Water Quality Board of 43 Areas of Concern (AOC). These are pollution hot spots where water quality impaired the beneficial uses of the Great Lakes by degrading them chemically, physically, and biologically. The IJC membership is composed of the eight Great Lakes States and the Province of Ontario in Canada.

As a result of a 1985 agreement, the IJC worked out a process to develop and implement Remedial Action Plans (RAPs) for each Area of Concern.

The process departs from the traditional approach for pollution control by regulation. Instead it relies on involving all stake-holders working together and using their resources to solve problems. It shifts the process from a top-down approach to a bottom-up approach. It is a meaningful and powerful way of doing business because plans developed locally create greater local awareness and a commitment to carrying out a project. This approach is not new to conservation districts, and it remains the backbone of the district program nationwide.

The 1987 amendments to the Canadian-U.S. Water Quality Agreement require the development of RAPs to employ a systematic and comprehensive ecosystem approach to restoring water quality and protecting the biota of the Basin. The RAP process, by nature, includes:

- defining the problem;
- identifying pollutants by source; and
- recommending actions needed to restore beneficial uses to the AOC.

The process requires state and local government to set schedules, define government responsibilities, and establish a monitoring and tracking system for implementing remedial action.

RAPs have broadened from a narrow focus on pollution control plans to a series of integrated resource plans requiring a look beyond the hot spots and determining what else in the ecosystem is contributing to the problem.

THE DISTRICT ROLE

As plans for AOCs began to be completed, it was clear that districts had a clear role — if they chose to claim it. Involvement varied a great deal. Some districts were totally missing the opportunity to participate either because they were not aware of the opportunity, failed to recognize their potential role, or others in the RAP process failed to recognize districts and their role.

NACD recognizes that conservation districts have much to offer in the process. Districts represent community leadership on their Boards. Board members are committed conservationists and practice what they preach on land they own.

Districts are effective implementers because they have the experience of working one-on-one with landowners and units of government, assisting them from inventory of problems to carrying out complex resource management plans. Districts have a history of group activity required in implementing the Small Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1956 (PL-566), multi-county Resource Conservation and Development projects (RC&Ds), and — more recently — water quality funded watershed projects under Section 108 and Section 319 of the Clean Water Act.

NACD, with the assistance of EPA and state association of conservation district leadership in the Great Lakes Basin, held a series of workshops for conservation districts and their working partners to further explore the district role in RAP development and implementation. Those involved with RAPs shared their experiences and insight with a wide range of Federal and state agencies and organizations at these workshops.

Districts demonstrated their innovativeness for seeking out involvement and providing a valuable role in the process. The four workshops identified six major roles for district boards and their staff. These six are not meant to be limiting, but rather to provide discussion points for possible involvement in the RAP process.

1. General Participation

District Boards represent a wide range of constituencies. Elected locally as leaders interested in government and conservation, district boards and their staff are looked to for leadership. Districts need to offer that leadership to

the RAP process by serving on steering or coordinating committees as well as technical subcommittees as appropriate. Districts are action oriented, involved in preparing resource inventories, involved in resource planning, and assisting in monitoring success. Leadership begins by offering it.

2. Educational Assistance

In the Great Lakes Basin, district boundaries are coterminous with county boundaries. Districts have no taxation powers, nor were they established to regulate. One of the cornerstones of district success is their ability to educate landowners on ways to conduct business while creating the least impact on the resource.

Districts use field days, demonstrations, informal group meetings, fair booths, newsletters, and the media to educate the public on resource issues. Districts should offer these resources to the RAP process.

3. Coordination

State legislation authorizing the creation of districts clearly defines the district role as a coordinator for resources available from federal, state, local, and other sources. Districts developed skills in this area over the last half-century and should make them available to the RAP process.

With the expansion of the RAP process to include an ecosystem approach, the process requires greater coordination including involvement across municipal and county boundaries. Districts are experienced in multi-jurisdictional work through PL-566, RC&Ds and water quality efforts with federal and state funding. AOCs often cross political boundaries. Districts could offer to coordinate activities such as wetland restoration, land treatment to reduce erosion and associated nutrients, and other nonpoint pollution loads that often are contributing factors in major problems identified in AOCs.

4. Organizational Structure

Conservation districts often began with a watershed approach where the collective action of many people in the watershed helped solve the problems. Districts can provide a lead role in helping to create organizations such as watershed associations, landowner associations, and others to help specific audiences identify with the issues.

Districts can, in turn, provide assistance where land treatment, wetland restoration, or toxic runoff provide a significant factor in long-term remediation or problems in the AOC.

5. Technical Assistance

Conservation districts traditionally provide technical assistance in soil and water conservation, in partnership with SCS, to individual landowners and units of government. Districts maintain close ties with USDA agencies and have developed water quality expertise. Districts, in many instances, have staff who are highly trained in pollution prevention and erosion control. District technical expertise should be offered to the RAP coordinating committee and technical subcommittees as appropriate.

6. Financial Support

Conservation districts are authorized to provide funds for conservation projects and receive a wide range of financial support for their activities from federal, state, and local units of government, and often grants from private sources. Districts should offer financial support where the objectives of the district and the implementation goals of the RAP are complimentary. Districts should volunteer sponsorship of Section 319 grants, state grants, Partnership for Wildlife Grants, RC&D grants, and others where district leadership is appropriate. Partnering these funds with others involved in the RAP stretches scarce resources for common objectives.

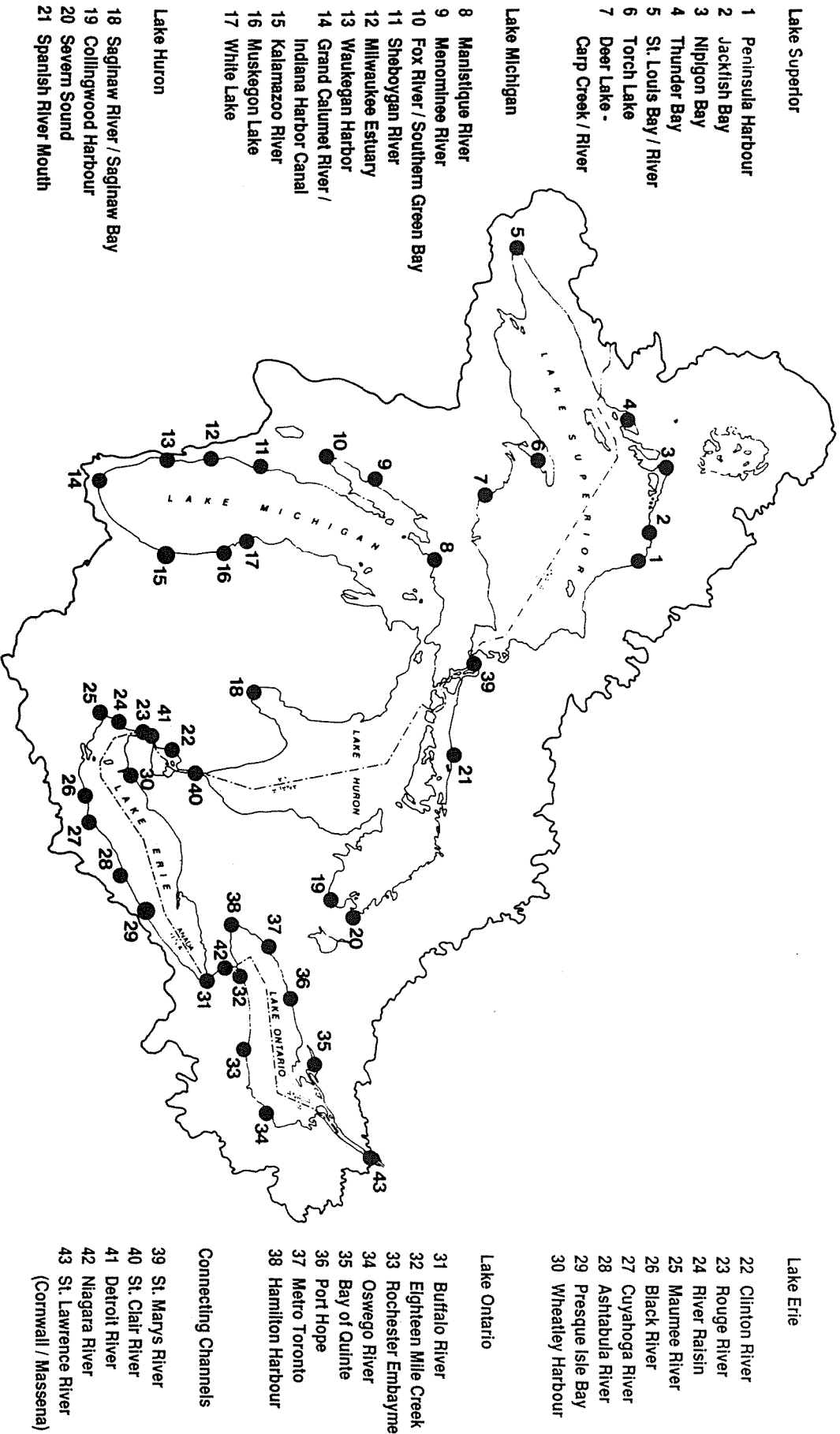
REACHING OUT

Many conservation districts are providing significant roles in developing, refining and implementing Remedial Action Plans. Districts seeking to participate should contact the chair of the appropriate RAP coordinating body or the state RAP Coordinator housed in the state water quality agency. Districts can also contact other districts involved with RAPs for further information by calling the state soil and water conservation agency.

The job of protecting the Great Lakes ecosystem is a job all stake-holders need to participate in. Districts have an important role. Reach out — take it.

This project has been funded wholly or in part by the United States Environmental Protection Agency Great Lakes Program Office under assistance agreement X995873-01 to NACD. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Environmental Protection Agency, nor do mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation for use.

FORTY-THREE AREAS OF CONCERN IDENTIFIED IN THE GREAT LAKES BASIN



Lake Superior

- 1 Peninsula Harbour
- 2 Jackfish Bay
- 3 Nipigon Bay
- 4 Thunder Bay
- 5 St. Louis Bay / River
- 6 Torch Lake
- 7 Deer Lake - Carp Creek / River

Lake Michigan

- 8 Manistique River
- 9 Menominee River
- 10 Fox River / Southern Green Bay
- 11 Sheboygan River
- 12 Milwaukee Estuary
- 13 Waukegan Harbor
- 14 Grand Calumet River / Indiana Harbor Canal
- 15 Kalamazoo River
- 16 Muskegon Lake
- 17 White Lake

Lake Huron

- 18 Saginaw River / Saginaw Bay
- 19 Collingwood Harbour
- 20 Severn Sound
- 21 Spanish River Mouth

Lake Erie

- 22 Clinton River
- 23 Rouge River
- 24 River Raisin
- 25 Maumee River
- 26 Black River
- 27 Cuyahoga River
- 28 Ashtabula River
- 29 Presque Isle Bay
- 30 Wheatley Harbour

Lake Ontario

- 31 Buffalo River
- 32 Eighteen Mile Creek
- 33 Rochester Embayment
- 34 Oswego River
- 35 Bay of Quinte
- 36 Port Hope
- 37 Metro Toronto
- 38 Hamilton Harbour

Connecting Channels

- 39 St. Marys River
- 40 St. Clair River
- 41 Detroit River
- 42 Niagara River
- 43 St. Lawrence River (Cornwall / Massena)