

Water Levels Action Plan - Georgian Bay Association

Role

The Georgian Bay Association (GBA) is a public policy advocacy group acting on behalf of its member associations to talk to and persuade government bodies at all levels to take action on issues of importance to its members.

Issues

Water levels in Georgian Bay are at an all time low level. The short-term prognosis is alarming and there are many ramifications for continued low levels.

- Water based owners will face difficulty in accessing their property.
- Many will face significant expense to relocate, repair or rebuild docks and/or boathouses in order to gain access.
- Smaller navigation channels will become unusable and hazardous for boat traffic, requiring expensive blasting operations and increasing the risk of boating accidents.
- Property values will be reduced due to inaccessibility.
- Water quality will be adversely affected as natural flushing of bays and inlets is reduced.
- Marina operators will be hard pressed to serve the needs of their customers to launch and moor boats. For some, this will bring their financial viability into question.
- Marina operators will need to blast or dredge their harbours, which is very costly, time consuming and requires regulatory approvals.
- The Great Lakes shipping industry is already having to reduce ship load capacities due to low water levels, which has led to increased costs and loss of business.
- Mining, manufacturing and processing industries, including mills, are directly impacted by reduced loads and higher shipping costs.
- Shoreline municipalities face increased costs to draw water from the Middle Lakes.

If water levels continue to drop, which is a significant risk if no action is taken, then these negative consequences are going to get considerably worse. It will impact many more people and businesses, and the negative effects on the economy will become more severe.

Objectives

GBA wants water levels returned to an historic healthy range. However, any solution on water levels that the governments agree will take many years to implement. So we are working on both the immediate challenges of extremely low water levels this year, and a strategy to achieve a return to a historic healthy range of water levels over time.

Immediate Challenges

There will be short-term challenges this year that current low water levels pose to many of our members, specifically access to marinas and passage from marinas to cottage properties. GBA has and will continue to work with local municipalities and the Provincial and Federal governments to help ensure that the necessary blasting and dredging can be done in time to provide spring and summer access, but maintain sensitivity to the environment. We will advocate for financial relief from governments, as appropriate, particularly for work that is required to keep communal channels open and marinas operational.

Recent Actions/Successes

GBA has struck a Water Access Committee to guide efforts to help local associations and property owners address the short-term challenges created by these record low water levels. GBA has taken a leadership role with local municipalities, governments and other stakeholder groups to develop coordinated solutions:

- We have contacted municipal representatives at the Township of the Archipelago and the Township of Georgian Bay, to discuss how to coordinate efforts. We will be meeting with them and other municipalities in early February to develop an advocacy plan.
- GBA has met with senior MNR staff at both the local and provincial level to start discussions on how to streamline blasting and dredging applications.
- GBA has met with other stakeholders such as Boating Ontario to discuss and coordinate our short term strategy.
- GBA has arranged a meeting with Minister Clement to discuss the short term challenges. Specifically, streamlining sign off on blasting and dredging applications through DFO and the potential for federal financial assistance for marinas and communal channel alterations that may be necessary to support the access needs of our members.

Strategy for Action – Permanent Solution

GBA wants water levels returned to a historic healthy range. In the absence of a Canada-US agreement on what the range of water levels should be, we recommend that the governments use the 1993 Water Levels Reference Study that clearly identified both a low and high crisis level for the Middle Great Lakes – a range of 44.4 inches. Water levels fluctuating between these crisis levels should be agreed as the target historic healthy range. As at November 30 2012, we were 16 inches **below** this low crisis water level.

Our challenge to the two governments is to return water levels above the low crisis point and then maintain them within the historic healthy range.

Process

The process that needs to be adopted by the Canadian and US governments to deal with the water levels crisis is, in simple terms, as follows:

- A. Acknowledge and make a decision to return the water levels in the Middle Lakes (Lakes Huron & Michigan, and Georgian Bay) to the historic healthy range.
- B. Authorize and fund an “agency” (IJC, Great Lakes Executive Committee or other) to investigate the potential solutions and make a recommendation on the optimum solution to the governments.
- C. Fund and implement the recommended solution.

GBA acknowledges the many challenges we must face to move this process forward and we will do so to the best of our ability.

GBA will use our established relationships with elected officials and their staff, up to and including the Prime Ministers Office, to advocate for action on all fronts to achieve our objective. This includes meetings, phone calls, letter writing, promoting public engagement from our members and using the media to communicate our message.

In doing so we draw on the expertise of other organizations, such as Georgian Bay Forever, who will provide vital science and economic impact analysis that is beyond our capacity to generate.

We have and will continue to network with other organizations that have common objectives to encourage a consistent message. We will focus these networking efforts on organizations that have connections around the Bay outside of GBA's traditional boundaries.

GBA will also provide encouragement and advice, if requested, to US interests that are engaging the US Government on this issue. To this end we will encourage GBA US based members to participate and support US advocacy efforts.

Recent Actions/Successes

- GBA participated in the public meetings that the International Joint Commission held in the summer of 2012. We stressed our position that the "Do Nothing" recommendation from the Study Board Report is unacceptable. We feel that this Report failed to fully assess the cost of doing nothing.
- GBA held an encouraging meeting with Ministers Baird, Kent and Clement in Ottawa in the fall of 2012. They understood the breadth of economic impact that low water levels has and will have on the Ontario and Canadian economy. They agreed to petition their US counterparts to direct the International Joint Commission to fast track a long term solution to the Middle Great Lakes water level issue.
- GBA has had follow up communications with the Ministers and their staff to keep this issue on their short list of priorities. We have also spoken to elected officials at all three levels of government to ensure that the voices and concerns of our members are being heard.
- GBA participated in discussions with US stakeholders who are trying to create a similar political commitment for action in the US.
- GBA has initiated meetings with other Canadian stakeholders including Ontario Boating and First Nations who have concerns about the low water crisis.
- GBA has conducted press interviews with numerous media outlets including radio, TV, magazines and newspapers in an effort to keep this issue and our position clearly in the public domain.
- GBA arranged a strategy session in December with the other members of the GB5 (Georgian Bay Forever, Georgian Bay Land Trust, Georgian Bay Biosphere Reserve and Eastern Georgian Bay Stewardship Council) to agree a joint water levels strategy so that we work together to coordinate effort.