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## Guarding the Great Lakes

Conference speaker urges protection for vital water source

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer May 10, 2018 Updated 3 hrs ago



A late afternoon sun reflects off Lake Michigan along Silver Beach in St. Joseph. Jon Allan, the director of the Michigan Office of the Great Lakes, spoke at a clean water summit Wednesday in Bridgman, promoting responsible stewardship of this vital environmental and economic resource.

Don Campbell / HP file photo

BRIDGMAN — Jon Allan, director of the Michigan Office of the Great Lakes, grew up in northeastern Ohio and remembers when the river near his home ran blue or orange, depending on what kinds of industrial waste were being dumped in the water that day.

Speaking as part of the Clean Water Summit, hosted by Michigan's Great Southwest Sustainable Business Forum at Weko Beach Wednesday, Allan also recalled that 40 years ago bulldozers were removing piles of dead fish from Great Lakes shorelines.

Before the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act, there was "not much" in place to protect the environment, Allan said.

A lot of progress and trillions of dollars in investments have been made over four decades, but many challenges remain, added Allan, since 2012 head of the agency formed in 1985.

He attended a conference in Brazil, where people asked him about the lead-tainted water situation in Flint. "This is a story that resonates with people. And it should."

Of the 188 invasive species that have found their way into the Great Lakes, none have been removed. That's why they are fighting so hard to keep out Asian carp because they don't want a 189th, Allan said. According to the office's website, 353 suggestions from 27 countries were received in a contest on how to get rid of Asian carp.

Michigan has been borrowing to pay for its water monitoring, but that pool of funding is drying up, he warned.

The question remains: how to manage 20 percent of the world's fresh water, part of a system that is always changing, Allan said.

When asked how many love the Great Lakes, all of Allan's audience raised their hands.

"That's who we are as a people," Allan said.

One of the missions of his office is to get everyone to love – and understand – the Great Lakes, he said.

One way to accomplish that is through education. "Water Schools" are offered that inform decision-makers about the importance of maintaining this ecosystem. The next session is scheduled for Kalamazoo.

Another is promoting water literacy in schools, most of which stop teaching about the water cycle in eighth grade, Allan said.

Niles has been selected as one of six cities that will host The Great Lakes Water Heritage exhibit, in partnership with the Smithsonian Institution. That display will arrive in January.

Allan also promoted the creation of vibrant waterfronts, using the renaissance in Detroit as an example. Berrien County Drain Commissioner Christopher Quattrin agreed that, 10 years ago, the city's riverfront was "barren."

Today, that area has made "a remarkable turnaround," Allan illustrated with photos, attracting more investments and new residents. Muskegon has made an \$80 million investment in its waterfront, and as a result 175 housing units are under construction in its downtown, he said.

The Office of the Great Lakes worked on a Resilient Bridgman master plan to identify infrastructure needs, and economic, housing and environmental concerns. It is in the preliminary discussion phases for a similar survey for St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, Allan said.

The state is encouraging the creation of water trails as the popularity of kayaking, canoeing and other water craft sports increases. Allan noted an accessible kayak launch in South Haven that can be raised or lowered to accommodate fluctuating water levels.

Ultimately, who is in charge of the Great Lakes?

"No one, and all of us," Allan said.

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