Illustrative Project Ideas

At the Fund, we seek transformative project opportunities that will improve the health of the Great Lakes ecosystem. Below are examples of project ideas where we see potential for significant regional impact by shifting systems, activating markets, catalyzing new regional action, expanding capacity or tools, and/or creating new operating rules or social norms. These examples are not intended to be exhaustive, and we welcome project ideas beyond what we have articulated here.

Alternative uses for less-productive agricultural land

- Launch a coalition of landowners, solar developers, and water partners to strategically site agrivoltaics in upper watersheds, targeting “problem acres” where installations can restore or protect water quality.
- Create a new business model that deploys prairie buffers through farmer cooperatives that manage land at scale by bundling conservation acres across multiple farms, generating ecosystem service payments tied to water quality benefits.
- Design and test new tools or strategies for monitoring and maintaining perennial systems, using remote monitoring and machine learning, to enable low-cost shared service models.
- Create viable markets that expand alternative cropping or grazing systems (e.g., agroforestry, rotational grazing, perennial grains, or other non-row-crop systems) on underperforming land, resulting in water quality benefits.
- Deploy smart water systems, including cost-effective controlled drainage and water retention technologies or management strategies, to enable the use of flood-prone land for water storage or regional water management.
- Build a cohort of water utilities that will collectively invest in shared, upstream “outside the fence” water quality improvements through groundwater replenishment or source water protection.
- Develop and pilot new alternative business models for activities on rural land (e.g., recreation) that generate value for the landowner and community while delivering water quality benefits.

The frontier of the blue economy

- Design a “Blue Industrial District Blueprint” that incentivizes the siting, operational design, and co-location of industries to reduce water withdrawals, wastewater burdens, and community impacts while maximizing co-benefits. Water and economic development agencies, academic, and industry partners could design and pilot demonstrations in multiple Basin locations.
- Deploy a data center operating model that minimizes total water impact. This could be achieved by adjusting cooling strategies or regional system workloads to reduce both on-site and off-site water use associated with electricity generation.
- A coalition of cities and state agencies co-create the necessary tools to guide industrial development decisions (e.g., siting, incentives, community benefits, and infrastructure needs) that are beneficial to communities and water resources, helping local communities across the basin navigate water-intensive industrial growth.
- Build and test a real-time information system that enables data center operators to adjust energy usage or computing loads based on dynamic impacts to critical water supplies, and use this

system to develop an industry gold standard for operational optimization that minimizes water impacts.
- Launch financial products, such as “data center life insurance”, that cover the long-term carrying costs of expanded/enhanced development-driven water infrastructure, ensuring communities are not burdened with stranded assets if facilities are decommissioned or downsized.

Action pathways for emerging contaminants

- Launch a network of utilities, public agencies, industry, and community partners that take new control actions to improve water quality based on local contaminant data and source tracking tools.
- Create an early warning system for emerging contaminants that connects the dots between problems and a cohort of stakeholders positioned to respond. This could include co-developing and scaling new methods for rapid contaminant identification and response, as well as linking new detection tools (e.g., PCR, low-cost sensors, or machine learning algorithms) to upstream response playbooks that shorten the time between detection and action.
- Accelerate the pace of contaminant containment and destruction by implementing upstream interception strategies that integrate land, water, and infrastructure systems for containment. This could also involve developing and deploying new scalable destruction tools with critical stakeholders across the basin.
- Develop and deploy a rapid, high-throughput monitoring and source-tracking system that moves microplastics detection from manual sampling to routine practice across state environmental laboratories and academic institutions, enabling earlier and more targeted control actions at scale.
- Build a coalition of industry stakeholders interested in deploying best practices to minimize contaminant sources. This could be done by co-designing and implementing practical changes in materials handling, site practices, or capture infrastructure that can be replicated across the basin.

Or your next big idea—help us understand your exciting vision for how to improve the Great Lakes Ecosystem! For more information about the Fund’s Call for Ideas or our application process, please visit our website.