



Great Lakes Protection Fund

Request for Preproposals: A Call for People, Ideas and Projects

Submission Deadline: March 18, 2026

Visit our [website](#) for additional information.



Creating the Tools for our Water Future

Request for Preproposals

Summary

[The Great Lakes Protection Fund](#) aims to support a suite of projects that will design, deploy, and test innovations that create new building blocks for the future of our region's water use, improving our waters, communities, and economies. The Fund is seeking to invest \$4M in new project activity in 2026.

The future of our region's relationship with water is changing. Industries with high water and energy needs are growing. A changing climate is creating new dynamics in the agricultural sector and new challenges to water management. At the same time, emerging technologies can be leveraged for public benefit. We have an opportunity to begin building the roadmap for what this future could look like and the tools we need to get there.

Here are three areas where the Fund believes project teams could make a transformative difference by launching new solutions that protect water resources:

- Demonstrating alternative uses for less productive agricultural land.
- Creating new operating models for high-water-use industries.
- Increasing regional capacity to address emerging contaminants.

Like all Fund-supported work, projects should be team-based, action-oriented efforts that yield meaningful benefits for the Great Lakes ecosystem. These solutions should also articulate a clear strategy for how the work will activate broader regional adoption. Successful teams will be collaborations that include members from a range of sectors and a diversity of perspectives, skills, and expertise.

We are looking for project teams that will try something new, engaging people who have never teamed up before, and building solutions that make better sense to everyone. Demonstrating how these strategies can be implemented in real-world settings is more powerful than relying on desktop research, policy analysis, or planning activities alone.

Three-page preproposals (no more than 1,500 words, 11-point font) are due by March 18, 2026.

The Fund will review preproposals upon receipt; early submissions are therefore encouraged. Selected teams will be asked to submit a more detailed proposal. Projects could be funded starting in September 2026.



What We Seek

The Fund seeks team-based projects that launch new, first-of-a-kind, catalytic innovations. We seek collaborations that include new voices, new actors, and new ideas. We look to launch solutions that are ten, one hundred, or one thousand times more effective than the approaches they replace. We are looking for teams that will take concrete actions that unlock new resources by opening new markets, shifting policy, and attracting other leaders to improve upon what has been created. Ambitious theories of change, coupled with a pragmatic implementation plan, are welcome!

Experts advise us that several areas are ripe for such innovations.

Alternative Uses for Less-Productive Land

Context: In a changing climate, the region can expect shifting growing conditions and environmental dynamics that will affect its agricultural and silvicultural systems. Today's marginal, idle, flood-prone, erodible, or unproductive land offers a window into what our future may look like as well as a promising testing ground for better alternatives. How do we start building prototypes for the future of rural land use that benefit producers, local communities, and the environment?

Interest area: We are interested in demonstrating alternative land uses in rural communities that repurpose less productive land to maximize landowner and environmental value—keeping rural communities resilient and water systems healthy. We're specifically interested in new land uses and water management strategies in rural communities that generate value for the producer and the local community through economic, social, or environmental benefits while also delivering clear improvements to the basin's waters. This includes repurposing underperforming lands, improving on-farm water management, and centering landowners as key drivers of conservation.

Several opportunities are particularly ripe for exploration, innovation, and experimentation. Teams could launch:

- Marginal land transitions that unlock meaningful ecological and financial value through restoration, ecosystem services, cropping systems (including perennial grasses and tree crops), or agrivoltaics.
- Smart water systems, including cost-effective controlled drainage and water retention technologies, that leverage flood-prone land for water storage or management.
- New ways of bundling marginal land into assets that can be managed at scale and leveraged for financial and environmental benefit.

We will be looking for a clear theory of change that envisions how piloting this work on marginal parcels will lead to broader basin-wide adoption. We encourage unlikely coalitions of partners, including county or community leaders, financial institutions, landowners, producers, and researchers, among others. So, consider the stakeholders who may benefit from this work and ensure they are engaged.

The Frontier of the Blue Economy

Context: The water use landscape in our region is changing. New high-water-use industries—including semiconductor and microchip manufacturing and data centers—are increasing, and communities are



seeking strategies to maximize benefits and minimize harm. There is an opportunity to build and test credible, basin-specific solutions that balance industrial water use and ecosystem health through innovative water management strategies.

Interest area: We are interested in work that addresses the growing, often invisible, water footprint of digital and industrial infrastructure through the smart management of where and how water is used. In particular, we are seeking work that demonstrates the potential for optimizing high-water-use industries by managing their total water footprint (including both direct and indirect water use) to minimize environmental impact across the basin. And we seek pilots and networks that support communities to help position the region for more water-positive development.

Teams could launch:

- A water use optimization system that adjusts cooling strategies or system workloads to account for both direct and indirect water usage at different timepoints.
- A consortium of cities that establishes a gold standard for industrial development that minimizes water impacts with a shared plan for implementation across economic development and water stakeholders.
- Pilots that optimize the placement of data centers via co-location with other industries or public infrastructure to generate co-benefits (such as heat generation or water infrastructure improvements).

We seek projects that show how the design, placement, and management of high-water-use industries can protect and improve the health of the region's water resources. Work should include specific actions, all stakeholders, and a plan for regional change.

Action Pathways for Emerging Contaminants

Context: Our region continues to face a growing list of emerging contaminants that affect our ecosystem, including PFAS, micro- and nanoplastics, pharmaceuticals, antimicrobial-resistant organisms, and the next potential threat. Communities need better, quicker ways to identify emerging contaminant sources and their fate and transport, as well as effective control strategies to mitigate their impact. Enhanced computing power and machine learning tools may help us accelerate the pace at which we can identify and address these emerging contaminants.

Interest area: We are interested in work where communities, industry, and governments intervene to minimize harm by utilizing new tools and strategies to rapidly identify areas of concern, determine the sources of emerging contaminants, and respond effectively. This may include more rapid or effective identification or source tracking of contaminants, or control strategies that extend producer responsibility or create circular economies where they matter. The intent is to increase the effectiveness of the region's control strategies and improve water quality.

Teams could launch:

- Quicker ways of connecting the industrial ecology of micro and nanoplastics with ecosystem toxicity information to accelerate control actions.



- More effective ways for the region to collect, analyze, pool and share data related to emerging contaminants to address local problems.
- New technologies or strategies to control or eliminate emerging contaminants at scale.

We aren't looking for new tools on their own, but rather for a strategy to activate regional action with enhanced tools or approaches. Data collection tools or monitoring efforts should also include a clear action strategy that will result in water quality improvement. And the end user should be involved in building the solution they will use

Please see our supplemental resources for additional [illustrative project ideas](#). Example projects are non-exclusive. In fact, we are open to ideas that fall outside the scope of this Request for Preproposals, provided they have the potential to deliver high impact and align with our [strategic priorities](#). So feel empowered to share your ambitious ideas and vision for impact.

Criteria

The Fund will evaluate individual preproposals to assess how they:

Drive positive ecosystem impact: Projects should be focused on the health of the Great Lakes ecosystem. The project team needs to identify, as clearly as possible and as early as possible, the specific ecological improvement that could result from the proposed project. Results should be measurable; the team should identify leading indicators of success and how the basin will benefit.

Have regional consequence: The Fund supports regional actions, even if the work is prototyped in a few locations before being more broadly deployed. The action being tested should have clear regional value. Work should involve multiple sites across the region. Teams should have a vision for the expected regional impact of the proposed work, even if this impact happens after the project is complete, and they should seek the necessary support to engage key regional audiences in designing and executing the pilot activity.

Have a compelling theory of change: The Fund will look for projects that take a systems approach—emphasizing how concrete actions shift markets, policies, or social expectations. Successful projects create value for users, communities, and industry—and their behavior changes as a result. We will look for project teams that are working to influence behavior across the set of actors necessary to affect the health of the basin. Project teams should ensure that demonstration or pilot settings are creating products for customers elsewhere and clearly identify who will utilize the results of those pilots. This ensures that the impact of the work extends well beyond the funding period. We do *not* encourage projects that rely on a “create and disseminate” approach by creating a prototype without involving potential users and then distributing reports, software, or samples to drive adoption. The Fund will look for evidence that the work proposed is credible, practical, and likely to lead to the results proposed.

Are collaborative efforts: The Fund seeks work that is sufficiently ambitious that it requires deep collaboration to be successful. We look for multi-state, multi-institution, and multi-sector project teams that include the full range of people relevant to their project's expected outcome, work plan, and theory of change. These might include technical staff: engineers, hydrologists, aquatic ecologists, and biologists; management professionals, financial experts, industry representatives and government agency staff; and community leaders, property owners, producers, and others to ensure diverse and deep connections to



the solutions and to the communities that will adopt the results. While the exact structure of this collaboration varies by project, we will assess the team's composition to ensure that the full range of stakeholders are involved.

Your idea doesn't need to be fully developed. We welcome ideas that are still in their formative stages. At this preproposal stage, while desirable, it is not a requirement to have commitments from all participating institutions. The Fund does expect full commitments at the full proposal stage. In some cases, we can provide design support for ideas that require additional time or resources to develop a project team or workplan. Feel free to reach out to us to determine if your concept is ready for a preproposal submission.

Eligibility

The Great Lakes Protection Fund can support a wide variety of applicants. Non-profit organizations (including environmental organizations, trade associations, and universities), governmental agencies, individuals, and for-profit businesses are eligible for Fund support. Successful applicants must maintain open access to project data, records, and information.

All applicants must show that the proposed work has clear public benefit and that any related financial benefits will accrue to the public good. Government agencies must show that Fund support is not being used to replace or duplicate funds. The Fund will not support advocacy, lobbying, litigation, compliance obligations, land acquisition, local clean-up, public works projects, or general operating needs.

Content of Preproposals

Preproposals should include an applicant [cover sheet](#), 2-3 page narrative including the project budget, and a copy of the Team Lead's resume/CV in a single pdf. Narratives should be no more than 1,500 words, 11-point font.

Please submit preproposals via email to preproposal@glpf.org no later than 5:00 PM CDT on March 18, 2026. The Fund will begin review upon receipt. The Fund will invite project proposals from a subset of teams. Fund staff and other technical experts will review these full proposals prior to a funding decision by the Fund's Board of Directors.

In your preproposal narrative, please address the following:

Ecosystem Impact: What you hope to achieve

Discuss what could change as a result of this work and identify specifically how the Great Lakes will be improved because of this work, both in the short and long term. Be as specific as possible about the ecosystem impact of the work and briefly discuss the importance of the expected impact. This can include your vision for the impact beyond the project period.

Your Strategy: How you plan to do the work

Briefly summarize your theory of change, the behaviors you seek, and how your work unlocks those behaviors for the benefit of the Great Lakes. Sketch the path from launch to basin-wide impact. Describe who will use the strategies you're launching, the value those audiences see in the work, and identify their role in designing the innovation you will create. Discuss why you believe that approach will work. Outline



the work to be carried out. Include a project timeline that contains the major steps. Show how the work will lead to the expected outcomes identified above. If your concept is particularly early-stage, please explain why the opportunity is compelling and the early steps needed to develop a project that meets the criteria described above.

Your Team: Who will be involved

Identify the project team members (those supported by the request, by other funding sources, and volunteers), and indicate their roles, responsibilities, and qualifications. Your preproposal should reflect meaningful collaboration among all interests affected by the project, especially non-expert audiences, and include members from entities that will ultimately use the tools and approaches developed. It is fine if not all team members are engaged yet, but describe who you think needs to be involved, what role they will play, and what it will take to assemble the team.

Resources: What you will require to do the work

Present the estimated costs of the proposed work in summary categories: personnel, equipment and supplies, travel, consultants, overhead, etc. The Fund will support overhead costs at a maximum of 15% of project costs. Identify the type and amount of support requested of the Fund. Identify how other monies will be raised to support the proposed work. Identify any other resources you require to do the work.

Projects could be financed with outright cash grants, convertible grants, debt, equity, or some combination.

Visit the Fund's [website](#) to find more information, including [Frequently Asked Questions](#) and [Illustrative Project Examples](#). You can also explore the Fund's [general funding guidelines](#). Questions can be directed to Collin Knauss, Project Development Manager, at 847-425-8193 or cknauss@glpf.org.

Calendar

January 2026

Request for preproposals released.

March 2026

Preproposal submissions due on March 18, 2026, at 5:00 pm CT. Preproposals will be reviewed as they are received. Early submissions are strongly encouraged so that staff may provide feedback.

May 2026

Full proposals invited for a subset of teams.

Summer 2026

Full proposal review and revision.

September 2026

Announcement of initial awards. The fund will continue to work with promising opportunities that are not yet ready for immediate funding. This may extend the application timeline for some projects.



About the Great Lakes Protection Fund

The Fund's mission is to identify, demonstrate, and promote regional action to improve the health of the Great Lakes ecosystem. It is the nation's first ecosystem endowment, created by the governors of the Great Lakes states in 1989. The Fund provides financial support to teams that undertake collaborative projects in support of its mission. The Fund makes grants, issues debt, and can take equity positions in those projects. The Fund does not support lobbying, litigation, advocacy, public works projects, or compliance obligations. The Fund has invested over \$110 million in 329 projects, involving more than 1,000 collaborating institutions. More at glpf.org.