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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

DECEMBER 20, 2011, 6:34 P.M. ET

Congress OKs \$300 million for Great Lakes cleanup

Associated Press

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. — Congress has approved \$300 million to keep a multi-year program going that is aimed at fixing some of the Great Lakes' biggest environmental problems, from invasive species to river bottoms laced with toxic chemicals.

Funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative was contained in a larger spending bill that cleared the House and Senate last week and awaits President Barack Obama's signature.

The measure also will set aside roughly \$533 million for loans at little or no interest for states in the region to upgrade leaky sewer systems.

"The 2012 budget represents a significant victory for the millions of people who depend on the Great Lakes for their drinking water, jobs and way of life," said Jeff Skelding, campaign director for the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, which represents more than 100 organizations.

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative began with a 2005 report developed by government agencies, nonprofit groups, Indian tribes and other interests that said the lakes were on the verge of ecological collapse and needed a huge infusion of cash to deal with festering problems.

Among them: invasive species such as zebra and quagga mussels, which gobble plankton that forms the base of aquatic food chains; harbors and river mouths tainted for decades with heavy metals and chemicals; loss of habitat caused by wetland degradation; and water pollution from farm and urban runoff.

Obama promised during his 2008 campaign to seek \$5 billion for the program over a decade. Congress appropriated \$475 million in 2010 and just under \$300 million this year. The newly approved money will continue the program at its current level.

Grants from the program have been awarded to more than 900 local projects in the eight Great Lakes states, which are Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

"Michigan has a huge stake in the success of this effort to protect the Great Lakes and it is vital that we continue to provide strong support through sustained levels of funding," said Rep. Sander Levin, a Michigan Democrat.

The federal budget for next year designates nearly \$1.5 billion for a separate fund that provides loans for municipal sewer repairs. Based on a previous formula, the Healing Our Waters group said the Great Lakes states would get about \$533 million.

Sewer overflows following severe rainstorms are a longstanding problem in the region, sometimes leading officials to close beaches.

Congress rejected an amendment proposed by Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., that would have given the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers an 18-month deadline to finish a study of ways to separate the Great Lakes and Mississippi River systems to prevent Asian carp and other species from migrating between them.

The Army Corps says it will complete its study by 2015, which critics say is too slow.

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