http://www.waterkeeper.org/imgs/pwn/brand/online_logos/120x37.gif  *Western Lake Erie* WATERKEEPER*® Association*

MEMBER ***“Western Lake Erie - warm, shallow & lots of fish”***

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It is with great pride and passion that I come here this evening representing the Great Lakes warmest shallowest fishiest waters – the Western Lake Erie watershed – I am here as the waterkeeeper and executive director of the Western Lake Erie Waterkeeper Association, I also serve on Oregon City Council and am president of the Toledo Lighthouse Society. The Great Lakes have 20% of the world’s surface fresh waters and 95% of the US’s. Lake Erie is the most developed, dredged, and populated of the Great Lakes containing only 2% of Great Lakes water quantity but with over half of the consumable fish. Lake Erie’s average depth is 62’ and is the only Great Lake with three basins – one of which the western basin’s has an average depth of 24’. Western Lake Erie is the breadbasket of the Lake Erie. The Maumee River has the best walleye spawning waters in the world.

In the past five years here in the Western Lake Erie basin we have witnessed more and more green water in the summer caused by the increasing growth of algae. The blooms seem to be getting earlier every year with more algae that lasts longer well into the fall. While we all want and need good algae, the kind that is increasing in West Erie is microcystis – bad algae that is toxic and harmful. Researchers say algae is caused by too many nutrients and that the greatest source of nutrients – especially phosphorous - is from farm run off. Other sources of nutrients are sewage(especially wastewater plants that cannot treat all the sewage in heavy rains), lawn fertilizers, factory farms, and the resuspension of nutrients from dredging and open lake dumping. Algae also likes thermally warmed water .

A study released in the fall of 2009 by the University of Toledo Lake Erie Center and Ohio Sea Grant states that bad algae likes turbidity. Studies also show that turbidity from open lake dumping circulates up to 100 miles away.

After a cold 2008-2009 winter, and one of the coolest summers on record, the amount of algae in Western Lake Erie should have been less than in 2008 but that was not the case, it was worse than ever. At times the waters of western Lake Erie looked more like green crops rather than water. Intakes in boats were clogged. Walleye numbers are declining. Many of us no longer swim in the lake.

Annual dredging is critically important to the region’s economy. Fishing, boating, sailing, swimming and water related recreational activities also contribute millions to the areas’ economy. The Brookings Institute conducted a cost benefit analysis of what clean water and Great Lakes Restoration will do for the region’s economy and concluded that for every $1 invested, there will be $2 in return. Many say water is the oil of the future. We are lucky to have this great water resource that many in this country would envy.

The Toledo shipping channel is nineteen miles long beginning in Lake Erie several miles east of the Toledo Lighthouse and continuing through the shallow average depth 5’ waters of Maumee Bay into the Maumee River and to the ports of call. While the Toledo shipping channel requires the greatest amount of ongoing dredging in the Great Lakes, ideally about one million cubic yards a year, it pales in comparison to the dredging for the Houston port which requires annual dredging of 6 to 7 million cubic yards along a 52 mile shipping channel that is dredged to 45’ in an average depth of 8’ of water in Galveston Bay. The dredged materials in Houston are placed in a series of Habitat Restoration Units 200 acres or more that are designed for zooplankton and the bottom of the fish food chain. It works for the port and for the fish.

The green waters may be as much an opportunity to pull us all together to help fish populations grow by using sediments. But in the meantime the green waters show no signs of letting up and the sediments need to be contained until a fish reef/island is built. This is a request to ask Ohio EPA to place the Toledo shipping channel sediments in Facility Three while a Pilot Fish Island is designed and constructed. What the Houston port representative shared is that they have learned through the years how to help the fish using native grasses that help hold the soils and how to better design the restoration unit using sediments.

Right now there is no match funding through the $475 million Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. If the Port and others would pick a pilot trial fish island and design it, then funding for construction could be sought – it would be shovel ready. This would be a huge step to find a long term solution and beneficial use of the dredge materials. This pilot Fish Island would be beneficial to the port and to boaters, fishermen and recreational uses. There will need to be a series of fish islands if the pilot project works. Many of us would like to see the project by the Toledo Lighthouse.

Just today I read an article in the Mundelin Review – a community outside of Chicago, about a singer, Lee Murdock: “"I saw the lighthouse at Toledo Harbor from the deck of a 765-footlong iron ore freighter. Seeing that lighthouse, on its own man-made island with small craft pirouetting around it almost like a lady presiding over a ball in the mid-19th century, proved inspiring." This inspired him to write the song, The Lady of Old Maumee Bay, being sung this evening at an event.

Please contain the sediments hoping the green will not get worse and fund a pilot fish island project design with GLRI funds that will hopefully catapult into a fish island – maybe by the lighthouse, that contributes to the recreational use of these waters and helps the economic viability and sustainability of the port.

Sandy Bihn