Opponents: Budget cuts endanger Great Lakes preservation

Local groups and legislators say proposed budget cuts to a major Great Lakes cleanup program will significantly hamper their ability to do good work in the area.

It's the sixth year in a row, spanning two administrations, the program has faced possible cuts.

Under President Donald Trump's proposed budget for 2020, federal dollars for the Great Lakes Restoration Fund will drop 90 percent — from $300 million to a mere $30 million. The money falls under the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and helps bolster projects that aim to address environmental issues in and around the Great Lakes.

"Yet again, the president is proposing to cut effective, bipartisan programs like the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI)," Jennifer McKay, policy director at the local Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, said. "Northern Michigan has benefited from hundreds of thousands of dollars in grant funds to support important restoration projects."

She specifically pointed to ways in which the funds have been used locally since the federal program launched in 2010.

"The Watershed Council has completed several restoration projects including work on Tannery Creek, a new bridge over the Bear River, creation of a stormwater wetland at North Central Michigan College, and treatment of zebra and quagga mussels with Zequanox, among other things," she said.

See CUTS » A6
Local groups have used Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Funds to combat invasive quagga mussel, shown here, in Michigan waterways.

**CUTS from A1**

Michigan's Democratic senators were both quick to condemn the proposal.

"The Great Lakes provide drinking water for over 40 million people, are an economic engine for Michigan and are one of our nation's most precious resources," Sen. Gary Peter, D-Bloomfield Hills, said in a statement.

"I've seen firsthand across Michigan how funding from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has helped protect our Great Lakes for future generations from threats including invasive species, pollution and climate change. Simply put, the Great Lakes are part of our DNA as Michiganders."

He added:

"The Administration's proposal to nearly eliminate funding for the GLRI would severely hurt our ability to clean, preserve and restore our waterways, Just as I did before, I will work with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to ensure Congress fully funds the GLRI and that these proposed reductions never see the light of day."

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Lansing, who was a primary author and proponent of the original bill establishing the program, also vowed to protect the funds.

"The Trump Administration just doesn’t get it and is once again gutting funding for the Great Lakes," she said in a statement. "Just like last year, and the year before, the people of Michigan will make their voices heard and I will lead the bipartisan fight to restore every penny."

Rep. Jack Bergman, R-Watersmeet, whose district includes Emmet, Charlevoix and Otsego counties, was altogether more positive about the budget, saying he was "encouraged by the topline numbers as they bring fiscal responsibility to the forefront of the national conversation."

But he did make special note of the cuts to the Great Lakes program.

"When it comes to successful programs like the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, I'll continue working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to ensure full funding for FY2020," he said.

Threats to cut the Obama-era initiative have been a perennial problem, starting with the Obama administration itself. President Barack Obama's proposed cuts were modest: $275 million for fiscal year 2015, and $250 million for fiscal years 2016 and 2017. Both of those proposals failed.

Trump's first budget in 2017 for fiscal year 2018 proposed a reduction to $10 million.

"We need to continue to invest in the health of our Great Lakes and waterways," McKay said. "We will work with Congress to restore the funding to protect our drinking water, combat invasive species and protect vital habitat."