



Lake Erie Environmental Justice Grant Program – SFY 2025

New grant opportunity now available for underserved communities APPLICATIONS DUE APRIL 30, 2025

The Ohio Lake Erie Commission (OLEC) seeks project proposals for the Lake Erie Environmental Justice Grant Program to support environmental restoration and education projects in historically overburdened and underserved communities within Ohio's Lake Erie watershed. There are two levels of project to be funded: one large project at up to \$750,000 and up to five small projects at up to \$75,000 each.

Project types may include:

Habitat restoration, enhancement, and protection. Anticipated outputs from this task will be constructed projects that will create or restore wildlife or fish habitat. Applications will be evaluated for measurable outcomes for acreage and/or linear feet constructed.

Invasive species control. Projects for control of invasive species in aquatic and riparian habitats will be accepted. Acres of *Phragmites* and/or other invasive control will be the main measurable outcome for potential projects.

Non-point source runoff reduction. Anticipated projects may include constructed projects that will restore eroding stream banks, retain storm water, and/or serve as green infrastructure (rain gardens, bioswales, removing impervious pavement etc.). Grant reviewers will evaluate applications for pounds of nutrient reduction, linear feet restored, volume of storm water reduced, or acreage treated depending on the configuration of each proposed project.

Aquatic connectivity. Anticipated projects include those that daylight urban streams, repair or replace culverts, and remove or modify small low head dams or urban debris not covered by county ditching programs. These types of projects will be evaluated for linear feet (expressed in fractions of miles) restored.

Fish Consumption Communications. Engage communities, with a focus on disadvantaged and other communities with environmental justice concerns, and vulnerable populations, and share information on the risks and benefits of consuming Great Lakes fish, wildlife and harvested plant resources with the people who consume them.

Hands-on, place-based Great Lakes environmental educational opportunities. These projects should include a specific Great Lakes or Lake Erie educational component. For example, programs for underserved youth to engage with Great Lakes Literacy programming or to travel for outdoor

education opportunities. The anticipated primary outcome is the number of youth served for this type of project.

Background

Many communities have been overlooked for environmental investments in ecosystem services such as improved habitat, storm water management, and coastal resilience. With federal funding provided by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the Lake Erie Environmental Justice Grant Program will focus on supporting restoration projects in historically overburdened and underserved communities within Ohio's Lake Erie watershed.

Through this grant program, we aim to support projects that address critical needs such as:

- **Advance community self-reliance and environmental restoration in historically underrepresented communities, both urban and rural;**
- **Enhance storm water management to improve the health of Lake Erie and its watershed; and**
- **Strengthen community resilience to intensified storm events through environmental projects and education.**

Our goal is to reach people and communities that have historically received little or no funding for these types of projects, assist them with the implementation process, provide grant training, and build capacity for accessing future funding opportunities.

To ensure funding reaches those most in need, OLEC is partnering with [Black Environmental Leaders \(BEL\)](#) and [Rural Action \(RA\)](#). These equity partners bring valuable expertise and strong connections to underserved communities, helping us better direct resources where they are needed using their deep knowledge and relationships to guide our work.

Overburdened and Underserved Communities

This program is designed to promote environmental restoration investment in communities living with the legacy of structural inequities such as localized pollution, low income, racial discrimination, and/or low infrastructure investment. OLEC seeks to fund projects in historically overburdened and underserved communities with unmet needs for investment in ecosystem services such as improved habitat, storm water management, and coastal resilience.

Many of these communities contain aging storm water infrastructure, underutilized open space, and limited water resource education due to lack of access to technical support and funding. These communities are often the most vulnerable to impacts from conditions such as more frequent weather events, increased flooding from higher rainfall, and increased exposure to higher temperatures.

Qualifying communities have not been predefined other than the requirement to be within Ohio's Lake Erie watershed. The applicant will be asked to describe how the community being served is low

income, low investment, experiences high pollution levels, or is otherwise identifiable as overburdened or underserved based on the criteria indicated below.

Community Criteria

The project location or population served must be within the borders of Ohio's Lake Erie watershed as defined by the borders of the state and the USGS hydrological boundaries for tributaries of Lake Erie (Hydrologic Unit Codes 0410, 0411, and 0412). An interactive map showing the watershed boundaries is available at the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Office of Coastal Management at <https://gis.ohiodnr.gov/MapView/?config=interactiveatlas>. A detailed printable static map is available in the Ohio Coastal Atlas in Chapter 2 on pages 44-45. This book may be available at your local public library, or it can be accessed online at <https://ohiodnr.gov/discover-and-learn/safety-conservation/about-ODNR/coastal-management/ohio-coastal-mgmt-program/ohio-coastal-atlas-documents>. A less detailed map is also available at <https://ohiodnr.gov/buy-and-apply/regulatory-permits/water-use-management/water-diversion-permit-lake-erie-basin>.

Many methods have been developed to determine whether a community is considered "underserved", "overburdened", "distressed", or otherwise burdened. For the purposes of the Lake Erie Environmental Justice Grant Program, one or more of the following methods and metrics may be presented as evidence that a proposal will serve such a community. Alternate methods may be presented but should provide a similarly rigorous, evidence-based approach and reasoning. Suggested qualifying levels are not intended as cutoffs; the applicant may still apply but the project may be less competitive if the community scores below the suggested level. The applicant may choose the metric that best suits their situation. Applicants are encouraged to contact Commission staff (see contact information below) if there are questions about how to demonstrate that their project is eligible based on their selected criteria. This assistance does not constitute or imply approval of the project.

A. Census tract-based income and employment information

Census data are available through the [US Census Bureau data portal](#). Using the census tract(s) that will be included in the project area, compare the following rates to the metrics given below:

Census tract rate (or average of several tracts)	Defining Metric
Median household Income (MHI) less than or equal to statewide average	≤ \$58,116
Individuals with income below 200% of poverty level greater than or equal to statewide average	≥30.4%
Unemployment Rate (civilian) greater than or equal to statewide average	≥5.3%

From: Ohio EPA – Division of Environmental Assistance – State Revolving Fund (SRF)

B. Health Improvement Zones

Ohio [Health Improvement Zones](#) (OHIZ) refers to the socioeconomic and demographic factors that affect the resilience of individuals and communities – the ability to prevent human suffering and financial loss in a disaster. By understanding where these populations are located and what factors contribute to their levels of risk, Ohio Health Improvement Zones can aid in all phases of improving health in communities.

This tool contains both county-level and US Census Tract-level data on Health Improvement Zones and uses the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) created by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The SVI is a score ranging from 0 – 1 (low to high). A project area with an SVI higher than 0.5 may be considered, but a project area with a high SVI (over 0.75) is preferred.

From: Ohio Department of Health Tools & Resources

C. Community Development Block Grant National Objectives

One of the national objectives for the Community Development Block Grants is that the defined service area for the project must be comprised of at least 51 percent Low- and Moderate-Income persons. This can be determined using Census data, or it could be determined using a specific income survey. If one of these surveys is available for the project area under the Lake Erie EJ Grant Program, such a survey could be used to describe the community status.

See: CDBG Income Survey Documentation. Income Surveys are used in conjunction with the [Policy Notice 19-02](#), which includes the methodology requirements and sample sizes.

From: Ohio Department of Development

D. U.S. EPA Environmental Screening Tools

The Environmental Justice Screening Tool, EJScreen (<https://www.epa.gov/ejscreen>) is U. S. EPA's environmental justice mapping and screening tool that provides U. S. EPA with a nationally consistent dataset and approach for combining environmental and socioeconomic indicators. This tool provides a wealth of data across a wide range of environmental and socioeconomic factors. Reports can be generated that encompass a project area that will display the available metrics. While there is not one aggregated score, project areas with high state percentile rankings (over 80) will be preferred.

In the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool (<https://screeningtool.geoplatform.gov/>), census tracts that are overburdened and underserved are indicated on the interactive map. The tool uses datasets that are indicators of burdens in eight categories: climate change, energy, health, housing, legacy pollution, transportation, water and wastewater, and workforce development. A community is

considered to be disadvantaged if they are located within a census tract that meets the tool's methodology.

Project Scope

Proposals should fully describe the type of project, how it will be conducted and by whom, and how the community and Lake Erie will benefit. Please see the grant application at <https://lakeerie.ohio.gov/funding-oportunities/protection-fund/lake+erie+ej+grant> for full details of what information needs to be provided.

Applications will be evaluated for:

- degree to which the project provides benefits to the target communities;
- degree to which the project may stimulate environmental and economic benefits to Ohio's portion of Lake Erie and its watershed;
- project feasibility, use of suitable methods, and technical suitability to do the proposed work;
- qualifications of the applicant and/or partners to accomplish their stated objectives;
- cost effectiveness of the proposed budget;
- degree to which the results of the project will be disseminated to multiple audiences;
- timeliness of the project;
- degree to which the project can leverage resources (match) (optional). This may include in-kind or volunteer time from the community served or from its partners. Match is not required for this grant program, and it is recognized that resources may be very limited in the target communities. Minimal consideration will be given to this factor in grant evaluation, but it will be noted if offered.

Each project is required to contain an outreach and dissemination component. This should include efforts to disseminate results within the community being served.

Each project must include an evaluation component. Evaluation is meant to demonstrate the impact the project has on the underserved community and on Lake Erie and its watershed.

The appropriate metric(s) for the evaluation of the proposed project should be recorded and reported using the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Action Plan IV Measures of Progress. All proposals must include at least one of the following Measures of Progress:

- 1.2.1. Risks and benefits of consuming Great Lakes fish, wildlife and harvested plant resources are shared to inform consumption choices.
- 2.3.1. Acres controlled for invasive species to benefit habitats, native species and communities.
- 3.1.1. Estimated pounds of phosphorus reductions from conservation practice implementation.
- 3.2.1. Estimated gallons (in millions) of stormwater runoff reduced.
- 3.2.2. Miles of Great Lakes streams and shoreline restored or protected.
- 3.2.3. Acres of riparian buffers, wetlands and floodplains restored or reconnected.
- 4.1.1. Acres of coastal wetland, nearshore and other habitats protected or enhanced.
- 4.1.2. Miles of connectivity established for aquatic species.
- 5.1.1. Number of youth impacted through education and stewardship projects.

Technical assistance with evaluation metrics may be available to awarded projects to assist if necessary.

More information on these metrics can be found in the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Action Plan IV on the web at <https://glri.us/action-plan-iv>.

These funds are being provided through a GLRI grant to the Ohio Lake Erie Commission. In addition to state terms and conditions, federal terms and conditions for grants will apply to each project. Upon award, recipient will need to agree to comply with these terms and conditions. Please refer to the three documents linked on the Lake Erie EJ Grant Program website for additional details about the state and federal terms and conditions that will apply (State Terms and Conditions, Federal General Terms and Conditions, and Lake Erie EJ Grant Program Terms and Conditions). As proposals are reviewed, and throughout the subaward and project process, the Commission will evaluate whether any proposed activities need to be adjusted based on these terms and conditions and will notify the applicants/subawardees accordingly.

Please note: If the project will collect environmental information such as engineering or monitoring data, a [Quality Assurance Project Plan \(QAPP\)](#) may be required. Generally speaking, if a project involves construction of any kind, there may be requirements to monitor water, sediment, or other parameters before and after the project is completed to determine project success or results. If it is determined by OLEC and/or the U. S. EPA that a QAPP is required, there may be a three or four month period at the beginning of the grant period that should be reserved for the development of this plan prior to any environmental measurement activities begin.

The program will provide opportunities for community groups to participate who have never previously received GLRI funds. Projects should engage directly with members of the community. ‘Engaged’ means that community members are involved in planning, oversight, and/or execution, including providing, collecting, and applying community feedback within the confines of the program and project(s). Ultimately we expect to increase the number of underserved communities where projects are taking place. The location of communities will be identified by ZIP codes and U. S. Geologic Survey Hydrologic Unit Codes (e.g. HUC 8 or HUC 12).

Funding

There are two levels of project to be funded: one large project at up to \$750,000 and up to five small projects will be funded at up to \$75,000 each. Match is not required; however, applicants are invited to indicate whether the project includes leveraged resources such as volunteer time, or whether the project is part of an existing or larger effort that has separate funding. .

Subrecipients may request up to 60 days of advance funds (or working capital). After that, all costs will be paid on a reimbursement basis.

Deliverables

Grant products will be determined on an individual basis but may include:

- If it is determined by U.S. EPA in consultation with OLEC that a Quality Assurance Project Plan is required, this document will be included in the list of deliverables. Technical assistance with writing this document will be available from OLEC and our partners. Training for Quality Assurance is available through U.S. EPA.
- Interim reports at least on a seminannual basis (every six months for periods ending March 31 and September 30 each year) and/or at each reimbursement request if more frequent.
- Signage at project sites to credit funding sources as required by federal terms and conditions.
- Tracking information about environmental metrics suitable for each project type to be provided in final report.
- Tracking information summarizing the number of community members engaged or youth receiving educational access in both interim and final reports.
- Photographs, video, or other media showing project accomplishments in both interim and final reports.
- Final report summarizing the project.

How to Apply

Please use the Lake Erie Environmental Justice Grant application, available at <https://lakeerie.ohio.gov/funding-oportunities/protection-fund/lake+erie+ej+grant>.

The application PDF should be sent by email to lakeeriecommission@lakeerie.ohio.gov. If using the alternative application, please follow instructions included in that application to coordinate the submittal of your materials.

Timeline

The deadline to apply is **April 30, 2025**. We expect to announce the award winners no later than June 1, 2025, with grant funded work to be started no sooner than July 1, 2025 depending on the date that the grant agreement is signed. Small grants are anticipated to be approximately one year (but may request a longer period) and large grants are anticipated to be 2-3 years in length.

Contact

For more information on this RFP or questions on the application, please contact:

Sandra Kosek-Sills PhD, Environmental Specialist at sandra.kosek-sills@lakeerie.ohio.gov; 419-357-2775.

The role of the Ohio Lake Erie Commission (OLEC) is to preserve Lake Erie's natural resources, to protect the quality of its waters and ecosystem, and to promote economic development of the region by ensuring the coordination of policies and programs of state government pertaining to water quality, toxic substances, and coastal resource management. OLEC also is the lead coordinating agency for the H2Ohio Program, and for the Ohio Domestic Action Plan under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.

The Lake Erie Environmental Justice Grant Program is one of five Great Lakes Environmental Justice Grant Programs funded by U.S. EPA through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. The goal of these programs is to fund GLRI projects in disadvantaged and other communities with environmental justice concerns by providing technical assistance and reducing the administrative barriers to applying for and managing federal grant funds.

