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**NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION**Great Lakes Natural Resource Center  
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Sunday, March 1, 1992For Information contact:  
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TO RESCUE GREAT LAKES EAGLES**

ANN ARBOR, MICH. -- New evidence on the poisoning of bald eagles and ring-billed gulls on Lake Erie prompted a call today from environmentalists to Governors John Engler and George V. Voinovich of Ohio to endorse the much anticipated Great Lakes Initiative.

Last year, eagles on Ohio's shores of Lake Erie had a disastrous nesting season. Eight of the 12 eaglets that hatched died by the age of four weeks. According to the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and the League of Ohio Sportsmen, the Great Lakes Initiative would reduce the dumping of PCB's and other toxic chemicals, which are believed to be responsible for the eagle deaths:

"Scientists have ruled out every explanation except toxic poisoning and coincidence, and we don't think it's coincidence," said NWF Great Lakes Natural Resource Center spokesman, Tim Eder.

The young eagles died of "wasting," a syndrome linked with toxic chemicals in the birds' food that has been documented in other parts of the Great Lakes.

"We've known that reproductive success in bald eagles nesting in Michigan near the shores of the Lakes is substantially lower than nests inland, away from the shores," Eder said. "What we didn't know

before was that eagles in Ohio are dying after birth at incredibly high rates," added Eder.

Young birds afflicted with toxic chemical-related wasting syndrome are suddenly unable to digest and metabolize food, even though plenty is available.

In addition to the eagles, a large colony of ring-billed gulls nesting on Lake Erie's Maumee Bay near Toledo failed to hatch a single young gull in 1991. The colony contains approximately 2,000 nests. In previous years, scientists from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and volunteers have banded about 2,500 newly-hatched gulls from the colony. When they went to the colony to band the gull chicks in mid-June last year, the banders were shocked to find that not a single egg had hatched. The colony is on a confined disposal facility where contaminated dredge spoils are dumped. Scientists cannot explain the gull colony's failure but strongly suspect toxic poisoning.

Based on research on eagles and birds in other parts of the Great Lakes, NWF believes that the chemical most likely responsible for killing the eaglets and gulls is PCB's, a widely-used industrial chemical. Since DDT was banned in the 1970s, eagles throughout the Great Lakes have been making a comeback. But there is compelling evidence that eagles and other birds that feed at the top of the Great Lakes food chain still exhibit serious problems because of PCB-poisoning. Wasting syndrome also has been observed in tern colonies in Green Bay, and twisted beaks and other deformities have been observed in double-crested cormorants in the upper Great Lakes. In these and other cases, PCBs are responsible for the damage.

The Great Lakes Initiative will address precisely the problems being seen in Great Lakes eagles and gulls. PCBs enter Lake Erie from a variety of sources including direct dumping from cities and industries. Detroit's wastewater treatment plant at the Lake's head is one of the largest sources of PCBs, discharging as much as 0.5 pounds per day.

The Initiative would reduce this and other sources of toxics by setting new water quality standards to protect eagles and other wildlife. Michigan's and Ohio's existing standards only protect human health and aquatic life. The Initiative would prevent Detroit and other dischargers from continuing to use dilution and mixing zones to hide their wastes instead of treating them.

"We want to know where the Governors stands on this crucial Great Lakes protection package. If they care about eagles and toxic chemicals in the Great Lakes, then the most important thing they can do is tell the U.S. EPA to immediately move the Great Lakes Initiative forward," said Eder.

According to Ohio Department of Natural Resources biologist Mark Shieldcastle, who addressed the League of Ohio Sportsmen at their February 22 meeting, the toxic poisoning problem began in 1990 but got much worse in 1991. "If what happened in '91 continues, our population will crash," Shieldcastle told the audience.

At their meeting on Saturday, February 22, the League adopted a resolution (attached) that urges Governor Voinovich "to oppose any efforts to derail this Initiative." The League urged the Governor "to help protect Lake Erie and its environment by supporting immediate adoption of a strong Great Lakes Initiative."

According to League spokesman Jim Venditti, "Many people, including our members, are under the impression that toxics are not as much a problem in Lake Erie as the other Great Lakes. We often think of Lake Erie as 'the comeback Lake,' because it looks so much cleaner than it did 20 years ago. As we learned last weekend, the eagles and gulls are telling us that the food chain is still contaminated and may be getting worse."

The Ohio DNR and federal officials will be intensively monitoring the nests this year, hoping that the 1990 and 1991 die-offs were flukes, but ready to seize any dead eaglets and/or eggs to run chemical analyses. Officials still have no analytical data to categorically make the PCB--eagle death connection.

NWF is the nation's largest environmental organization with over 5.3 million members. Tim Eder is the Federation's water quality program manager and has studied Great Lakes bald eagles and toxic chemical problems for over 10 years.

The League of Ohio Sportsmen is Ohio's largest coalition of conservation clubs.