

Federal Regional Commissions: Great Lakes Authority Established and Other Updates

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For decades, Congress has indicated support for federal regional commissions and authorities (hereinafter “commissions”) by providing appropriations for existing commissions and by occasionally authorizing new commissions. During the 117th Congress, one new commission was established and two commissions were activated. Congress authorized the Great Lakes Authority (GLA) in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 ([P.L. 117-328](#)). Also during the 117th Congress, the Senate confirmed the nominations of federal co-chairpersons for the previously authorized Southeast Crescent Regional Commission (SCRC) and Southwest Border Regional Commission (SBRC). This Insight summarizes actions taken in the 117th Congress related to selected commissions, and includes considerations for the 118th Congress. See CRS Reports [IF11744](#) and [IF11396](#) for considerations regarding forming and starting a commission, respectively.

Background

The commissions are eight congressionally chartered, federal-state partnerships that were developed to address economic distress in targeted geographic regions. The authorized commissions are:

- [Appalachian Regional Commission](#) (ARC);
- [Delta Regional Authority](#) (DRA);
- [Denali Commission](#);
- Great Lakes Authority (GLA)—authorized in FY2023;
- [Northern Border Regional Commission](#) (NBRC);
- Northern Great Plains Regional Authority (NGPRA) (inactive);
- [Southeast Crescent Regional Commission](#) (SCRC); and
- Southwest Border Regional Commission (SBRC).

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The commissions share similar structures and functions. Except for the NGPRA and the Denali Commission, each commission consists of a federal co-chairperson and the governors of the member states. The commissions vary in terms of issues, appropriations, and service region and staff sizes. See CRS Report [R45997](#) for an overview of the commissions, including legislative and funding histories.

Changes to Commissions in the 117th Congress

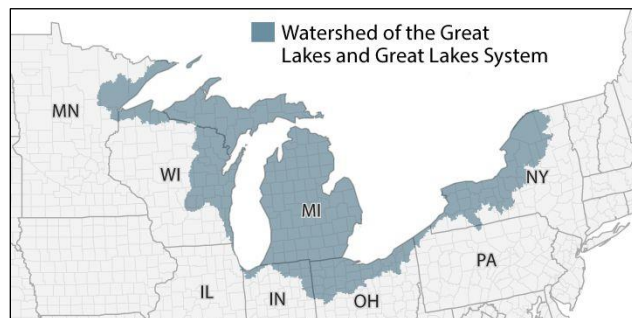
A New Great Lakes Authority

[P.L. 117-328](#) amended 40 U.S.C. §15301(a) to establish the GLA. The structure and functions of the GLA are based on the model of the NBRC, SCRC, and SBRC, which were established in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 ([P.L. 110-234](#)). Prior to the enactment of [P.L. 117-328](#), two bills introduced in the 117th Congress also would have established the GLA with core economic development and planning roles similar to those of existing commissions as well as additional roles (see [H.R. 7131](#) and [S. 5180](#)—both titled “the Great Lakes Authority Act of 2022”). The authorizing legislation requires that before the GLA may convene, the President must nominate and the Senate must confirm a federal co-chairperson. As of January 2023, President Biden had not nominated a federal co-chairperson for the GLA.

The geographic boundaries of the authorized commissions’ regions are defined in statute, usually using county-based designations. The GLA differs in that its service region is defined in statute based on federal definitions of the area’s watershed (see **Figure 1**) so that the region

shall consist of areas in the watershed of the Great Lakes and the Great Lakes System (as such terms are defined in section 118(a)(3) of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act (33 U.S.C. 1268(a)(3)), in each of the following States: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Figure 1. Great Lakes Authority



Source: Map created by CRS based on terms in [P.L. 117-328](#) and U.S. Geological Survey data.

Notes: The GLA region consists of areas in the watershed of the Great Lakes and Great Lakes System in states specifically designated in the statute.

Southeast Crescent Regional Commission

[P.L. 110-234](#) authorized the SCRC in 2008. Thirteen years later, in 2021, the U.S. Senate confirmed the SCRC’s first federal co-chairperson, [Jennifer Clyburn Reed](#), thereby allowing the SCRC to convene and begin activities. The SCRC [hired](#) its first chief of staff in 2022 and developed its [bylaws](#) and [strategic plan for FY2023 through FY2027](#). In FY2023, the SCRC plans to hire an executive director and develop a [competitive grant program](#) as well as a separate [J-1 visa program](#). Each fiscal year between 2010 and

2020, the SCRC received \$250,000 in appropriations. Appropriations increased annually after FY2020, with [P.L. 117-328](#) providing \$20 million in [FY2023](#).

Southwest Border Regional Commission

[P.L. 110-234](#) also authorized the SBRC in 2008. With the appointment and confirmation of the first federal co-chairperson, [Juan Eduardo Sanchez](#), in December 2022, the SBRC may convene. Between FY2021 and FY2023, the SBRC received \$9 million in appropriations over this three-year period.

Congressional Considerations

Congress may consider directing commissions to undertake certain grant programs or other activities to address specific congressional or regional interests. In addition to statutory requirements, the commissions' funding priorities and other initiatives are primarily determined through processes involving input from the federal office, commission members (generally composed of member state governors or their alternates), and community stakeholders.

Congress may consider changing how regions are defined or adding areas to the commissions' regions. Congress may also seek to create new commissions. Congress may further seek to amend program requirements or planning and governance structures of the existing commissions. Additionally, Congress may seek to examine the performance of the commissions, grant programs, or partnership activities and how they may impact the conditions for economic development in their respective regions.

Funding Levels and Reauthorizations

Congress may consider reviewing the level of appropriations for some or all of the commissions. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 ([P.L. 117-328](#)) provided [annual appropriations](#) for ARC, Denali Commission, DRA, SCRC, SBRC, and NBRC, but [P.L. 117-328](#) did not provide appropriations for the GLA. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, [P.L. 117-58](#)) also authorized and provided additional advance appropriations for the ARC in the amount of \$200 million for each of FY2022 through FY2026 (Divisions A and J).

Provisions impacting several commissions were included in the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 farm bill; [P.L. 115-334](#)) that is scheduled to sunset on September 30, 2023. As Congress considers drafting another farm bill, it may review provisions related to these commissions. For instance, the authorization of appropriations for the DRA, SCRC, SBRC, and NBRC were extended through FY2023 by the 2018 farm bill. The 2018 farm bill also extended the date for the "termination of authority" for DRA through FY2023. Separately, the [IIJA](#) extended the ARC's authorization through FY2026.

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