THE AUTONOMOUS HEARTLAND · WISCONSIN

Wisconsin Builds the Autonomous Fleet.

The Great Lakes are about to become the proving ground for America's autonomous and maritime future. **Wisconsin sits at the center of it** — with the shipyards, the airspace, the industrial base, the workforce, and the research anchors to lead.

$73.7B
MANUFACTURING CONTRIBUTION TO STATE GDP — THE LARGEST SECTOR

#1
IN THE NATION FOR MANUFACTURING JOBS PER CAPITA

8,700+
MANUFACTURERS STATEWIDE IN MACHINERY & PRECISION INDUSTRY

$209B
IN MANUFACTURED GOODS SOLD; ~$24B IN ANNUAL EXPORTS

THE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE

A paradigm shift is already underway.

As demonstrated in Ukraine, Iran, and across emerging theaters, the tools and art of warfare are being fundamentally rewritten. Autonomous systems are no longer a future capability — they are a present reality reshaping how air, ground, naval, and maritime operations are conceived and executed. The United States is investing **hundreds of billions of dollars** to onshore production of autonomous, maritime, microelectronics, energy, and advanced manufacturing capability. The question is where it gets built.

The fleets of the future must be *natively autonomous* — and the same technologies are **dual-use**, serving commercial shipping, port security, environmental monitoring, and Great Lakes freshwater research as readily as the Navy. The Midwest Defense Accelerator (MDX), a non-profit subsidiary of the Sagamore Institute, calls this region **the Autonomous Heartland**. Wisconsin's answer to that call is the strongest in the Great Lakes.

TEST RANGE · PROPOSED

Lake Michigan is the Navy's "Area 52."

In *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, Capt. Jerry Hendrix, USN (Ret.) — now Chief of the OMB Shipbuilding Office — argued the Navy needs a secure range to develop and test unmanned and autonomous systems away from adversary surveillance, just as the Air Force built Area 51. His answer: **Lake Michigan** — the only Great Lake entirely within U.S. territory, large and deep enough for surface and subsurface testing, with restricted military airspace overhead.

- **Restricted airspace R-6903** — already flown by Air National Guard aircraft from four adjoining states, including Wisconsin.
- **Autonomy is already on the water** — the U.S. Coast Guard Great Lakes District is operating a fleet of Saildrone Voyager uncrewed surface vessels across the lakes.
- **Proven surface operations** — the Navy has run sea trials in and around Green Bay for more than a decade.

WHY THE LAKE WORKS

A guarded coastline. U.S. Coast Guard Sector Lake Michigan and the 128th Air Refueling Wing at General Mitchell ANG Base anchor the western shore — with eight Coast Guard stations across Wisconsin waters.

Depth & scale. ~300 miles long, with basins deep enough for unmanned underwater development.

A regional Navy anchor. NSWC Crane in southern Indiana — one of the Navy's premier centers for electronic warfare, sensors, and unmanned systems — anchors the broader Midwest autonomous corridor a day's drive south.

Concept after Capt. Jerry Hendrix, USN (Ret.), "The Navy Needs an 'Area 52,'" *USNI Proceedings*, June 2023. The decisive edge in autonomy must be developed where competitors cannot watch.

WHY WISCONSIN

The assets are already on station.

A Wisconsin corridor — anchored at UW–Madison and Truax Field, reaching north to the Green Bay and Marinette shipyards and out to the Lake Michigan test box — integrates shipyards, airfields, a guarded coastline, a deep supply base, and the state's universities into one autonomous-native ecosystem.

MARITIME · MARINETTE, GREEN BAY, STURGEON BAY & SUPERIOR

Wisconsin Shipyards

More than **$800M** invested across Fincantieri's Marinette Marine, Bay Shipbuilding, and ACE Marine — a surface-combatant center of excellence — plus Fraser Shipyards' full-service Great Lakes capacity on Lake Superior. Already going autonomous-native: in April 2026, Fincantieri announced it will build **Saildrone's Spectre**, a 170-foot anti-submarine-warfare and strike unmanned surface vessel, in its Wisconsin yards.

AIR, LAND & SEA · MADISON / CAMP DOUGLAS / FORT MCCOY / MILWAUKEE

Airfields, Airspace & a Guarded Coast

The **115th Fighter Wing** at Truax flies the F-35A — only the second Air National Guard wing to do so. **Volk Field CRTC** offers one of the nation's most capable training airspace complexes; **Fort McCoy** is the Midwest's premier total-force training installation; the **128th Air Refueling Wing** extends reach; and U.S. Coast Guard Sector Lake Michigan secures the lakefront.

RESEARCH & INNOVATION · STATEWIDE

Universities & a Venture Engine

UW–Madison anchors a top-tier portfolio in advanced manufacturing, robotics, AI, materials, and cybersecurity — plus the Wisconsin Quantum Institute and a world-ranked fusion program. Thirteen Universities of Wisconsin and 16 technical colleges span the state. In Green Bay, **TitletownTech** — formed by the Packers and Microsoft — backs advanced manufacturing startups and hosts the annual Midwest Defense Forum.

INDUSTRIAL · STATEWIDE

A Pivot-Ready Supply Base

8,700+ manufacturers with deep strength in industrial machinery, precision metalwork, and navigational & control instruments — the exact disciplines autonomous and maritime production draws on. Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce and its Defense Industry Council, the Wisconsin Technology Council, and the Wisconsin Procurement Institute are organizing that base to compete for defense work.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR WISCONSIN

Jobs, growth, and technology that works twice.

WORKFORCE & JOBS

Careers, Not Just Contracts

Skilled, family-supporting jobs — welders, machinists, electricians, software and systems engineers — with clear pathways from Wisconsin's technical colleges, universities, apprenticeships, and the Guard and Reserve.

ECONOMIC BENEFIT

Federal Investment, Anchored Locally

New defense work anchors investment in existing plants, draws suppliers into the region, and multiplies through local economies — turning the state's industrial base into a durable, higher-value growth engine.

DUAL-USE APPLICATIONS

Technology That Works Twice

The same platforms serve commercial shipping, port security, Great Lakes freshwater science, environmental monitoring, agriculture, and logistics — widening the market beyond any single defense program.

The Autonomous Heartland needs a Wisconsin corridor.

The shipyards, restricted airspace, research universities, and manufacturing base exist in this combination nowhere else in the Great Lakes. Manufacturers, researchers, investors, and partners are invited to get involved.

wisecurity.org/area52

Contact: **info@wisecurity.org**