



Stateline

The Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments

Volume 9, Number 8 • August 2000

The Great Lakes cover 94,000 square miles in Canada and the United States.

Through both collaborative and individual efforts, states are pursuing measures aimed at preserving the lakes.

(Photo: Great Lakes Commission)



eight Great Lakes states and two Canadian provinces. “We just happen to be in a down cycle right now where we’re edging closer to the all-time lows that we experienced in the 1930s.

“The low levels, though, emphasize the importance of opposing any types of water diversion or withdrawal that could measurably affect lake levels. Once you create a reliance on water diversion or exportation, it would be literally impossible to get that activity to cease when lake levels are low.”

The shipping and marina problems caused by naturally low levels of water would be compounded — and maybe economically devastating — if Great Lakes water is diverted to other parts of the world in future years.

For that reason, limiting the export of Great Lakes water is considered one of the most critical issues that state lawmakers in the United States and provincial leaders in Canada must resolve.

“The pressures for water diversion and export are going to increase,” Donahue believes.

“When you look at the Great Lakes, you’re talking about 20 percent of the world’s supply of fresh surface water. There have been tens of billions of dollars pumped into the lakes to improve water quality, and we have this tremendous reservoir of high-quality water that I firmly believe will be the subject of diversion or export plans.

“The argument we’re making is that even though the Great Lakes have a large quantity of water, it’s an intensively used resource, and any diversion or export would leave the Great Lakes region vulnerable to losing its most vital natural asset.”

The issue came to a head a few years ago when the province of Ontario issued a permit allowing a company to withdraw and sell Lake Superior water overseas. Great Lakes governors found themselves in the unenviable position of being concerned about how such a plan would affect their states’ most valuable natural resource, but powerless to do anything about it.

The permit was later revoked, but the incident (Please turn to page 7)

Great stakes

New initiatives underscore the importance of lakes to region

by Tim Anderson

As water levels dropped to near-record lows in parts of the Great Lakes this summer, people around the region were reminded just how vast and vital the freshwater system is both as a natural and economic resource.

Numerous groups have been affected by changes in the lakes, from the shipping companies that had to adjust cargo amounts to the pleasure boaters that saw their launching docks and piers become unusable.

Since 1997, water levels have plunged by as much as 5 feet in some Great Lakes. While that number may not seem significant on the surface, for a freshwater system that holds 6 quadrillion gallons of water, the loss amounts to about 63 trillion gallons of water — enough to cover the continental United States by more than an inch.

Shifting water levels are natural and have been occurring for thousands of years. However, experts believe the troubles caused this year could provide an important lesson to policy-makers as they make crucial decisions about the Great Lakes’ future.

“Lake levels naturally fluctuate, largely as a function of precipitation patterns and climate,” says Michael Donahue, executive director of the Great Lakes Commission, a binational agency that represents the interests of the

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Stateline Midwest is published monthly by the Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments.

Annual subscription rate: \$60. To order, call 1-800-800-1910.

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Threats to Great Lakes include water diversion, exotic species

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has intensified efforts on both sides of the border to develop a binding agreement. Governors in the region currently can veto one another's water diversion plans, and they would like the current Great Lakes Charter amended so that Canadian premiers in Ontario and Quebec are included in the pact.

An outright ban on exporting water could violate international trade laws, so government leaders have been developing a plan that is both "scientifically sound" and "legally defensible," Donahue says.

In June, Michigan Republican Gov. John Engler announced a plan he believes will be agreed upon by premiers and governors that would allow a Great Lakes withdrawal only if the exportation provides "an improvement to the waters and water-dependent natural resources." He adds: "Water projects will be approved only if they do more good than harm."

Foreign invaders

While some legislators focus on stopping raids of Great Lakes water, others have their eyes on stopping another kind of foreign invasion.

"The proliferation of exotic species is the single biggest problem in the Great Lakes," says Michigan Sen. Ken Sikkema, chair of the Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs Committee. "The issue is more important than chemical pollution or diversion. The exotic species threaten the ecological future of the Great Lakes."

The Republican from Grandville is leading a legislative initiative in his state aimed at stopping non-native marine organisms such as zebra mussels and sea lamprey from entering the Great Lakes. These exotic species harm the region's fishing industry, threaten native species with extinction and cause extensive economic damage by clogging water intake pipes, he says.

To stop the influx of foreign invaders, Sikkema's legislation would require ballast water from outside Michigan waters to be sterilized before a ship can enter the state. Similar measures have been introduced in Minnesota and passed in a New York Assembly committee.

Critics of Sikkema's legislation believe the measure would sink Michigan's shipping industry. To relieve some of those fears, the state senator has held hearings with industry leaders and added provisions to the bill that would ease restrictions on "lakers" (ships that don't leave the Great Lakes) and repeal the state legislation if federal regulations are strengthened.

"States have to demonstrate that they're not going to sit back and wait for action in Washington," Sikkema adds. "Part of our strategy

has been to find lawmakers in other states to introduce and carry similar legislation. By being aggressive in individual states, legislators put more pressure on the shipping industry and Congress to pass a bill at the federal level."

The Great Lakes Commission has put together model legislation on exotic species it hopes can receive uniform support in the region.

"While it's laudable that states are recognizing a problem and taking initiative with it, we also realize that if you had 10 states and provinces all with different laws affecting the same part of the same ecological system, it's going to be a disaster both from a policy standpoint and an implementation standpoint," Donahue says. "We try to encourage the states and provinces to realize that we may be in separate political jurisdictions, but we are in the same ecological jurisdiction."

The eight-state Great Lakes Commission recently added Ontario and Quebec as associate members, a move that demonstrates the importance of closer state-provincial relations, says Minnesota Sen. Cal Larson, a Republican from Fergus Falls.

"We've been dialoguing with the provincial folks for a number of years, but they've always been observers; now we've formalized the relationship," adds Larson, a member of the commission, who has led efforts to guarantee funding for construction of a new Soo Lock in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

Antipollution efforts

While issues such as water diversion and aquatic invaders lend themselves to regional cooperation, environmental initiatives are often spearheaded on a state-by-state — or even community-by-community — basis.

"It's much more easy for someone to identify with a stream or local watershed than the entire Great Lakes," Donahue believes.

Michigan Rep. William Callahan originally ran for a seat in the Legislature after, as mayor of the city of St. Clair Shores, he became concerned about e-coli ratings shutting down local beaches. He has since become a leading advocate in his state for assuring water quality.

His and others' attempts to keep the Great Lakes clean are increasingly concentrating on nonpoint source pollution, contaminants that make their way into waterways through agricultural and urban runoff.

One way to curb the amount of nonpoint

source pollution is to stop urban sprawl, which often eliminates important green space, the Democrat believes.

"Sprawl brings with it a lot of problems," says Callahan, a member of the Great Lakes Commission. "Number one, you're clearing off a natural biosystem that has the ability to remove metals from groundwater and soil. In its place, we're bringing in impervious streets and roads and driveways. Plus, you're putting more of a demand on the existing infrastructure. Right now, in Michigan, we're losing 10 acres per hour of open space to development."

Donahue adds: "Attempts to revitalize urban areas and clean up brownfields are much more environmentally friendly approaches than simply chewing up our open space anytime additional development needs to occur."

The focus on nonpoint source pollution also will likely impact farmers, who may be asked to better control contaminants from fertilizers and pesticides that make their way into streams, rivers and, eventually, the Great Lakes.

Another area of environmental concern has been the buildup of development along the coasts, one of the most fragile, vital areas of the Great Lakes region. States have tried to preserve lakeshores through various conservation programs. In Ohio, for example, the state has partnered with the federal government to conserve 67,000

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Sen. Ken Sikkema
Michigan

acres of stream corridors in northwest Ohio. Over 10 years, the program will cost about \$200 million (the U.S. Department of Agriculture will pay for 80 percent of it). The project's goal is to improve water quality in Lake Erie by reducing sediment pollution and field runoff through the installation of filter strips, wetlands, hardwood tress and wildlife habitat.

In Minnesota, state legislators have appropriated money for the purchase of undeveloped shore land from owners with property near the state's lakes and rivers. The agreements would be in effect for at least 20 years.

"The greatest threat or challenge facing the Great Lakes isn't in the water at all; it's on land," Donahue concludes. "It has to do with land-use management and the need for controlling urban and suburban sprawl, controlling coastal development and putting more responsible land-use practices into play. So many of our water quality problems are directly attributable to abuses in how we manage the land." 🌟