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**CANADA BANS EXPORT OF WATER FROM GREAT LAKES**

by Mark Bourrie

 OTTAWA, SEP. 2 (IPS)--The U.S.-Canada commission that monitors the health of the Great Lakes has issued a six-month ban on the export or diversion of water from the world's largest fresh-water body.

 The International Joint Commission on Boundary Waters (IJC) imposed the ban to give governments time to study the environmental impact of removing large amounts of water from the five Great Lakes. **The water is in demand in the drought-affected East and Midwest U.S. regions, as well as in Asia.**

 The IJC study said only one percent of the Great Lakes is renewable, and **any major sales would irreparably harm the lakes' ecosystem.**

 "Once you go beyond that one percent, you're mining," said IJC co-chairman Leonard Legault. **"It's not a renewable resource**."

 **The Great Lakes region provides drinking water for more than 20 million people on both sides of the border between Canada and the United States.** It has a moderating influence on the climate of the eastern parts of both countries and also is a major freshwater fish-producing region and transportation link to the interior of North America.

 The U.S. administration is under pressure to open diversionary canals in the Midwest to **allow water from the Great Lakes into the Mississippi Basin**, where it would be used to maintain river levels as water further upstream in the Missouri River system is used for irrigation.

 **Most irrigation water west of the Mississippi River comes from the Oglala Aquifer, a once-huge pool of groundwater that has been depleted by U.S. farmers.**

 In addition, several Canadian companies **want to export Great Lakes water by tanker to Asian countries. Water bottling companies, which remove billions of gallons of groundwater from the Great Lakes basin, are already threatening the health of the lakes, which are now at historically low levels**, the IJC said.

 Water exporters view the Great Lakes as **an untapped resource**. The huge lakes, formed by the melting of the Ice Age glaciers that covered most of Canada, cannot withstand the pressure of massive water diversion, the monitoring agency said.

 But Canada's federal government does not have the power to stop water exports. Management of environmental and natural resources is the joint responsibility of the country's provincial governments. The 10 provinces also own most of the land below the 60th parallel.

 More than 12 months ago, an Ontario company was given an Ontario government permit to export water from Lake Superior, the world's largest fresh-water lake, to Asia. After public outcry and pressure from the Ottawa government, the province of Ontario revoked the license.

 The Great Lakes are not the only targets of water exporters.

 Small lakes in Newfoundland and British Columbia have also been the focus of applications for water export licenses. In Newfoundland, Canada's poorest province, a company has asked for a permit to export 50 billion liters from a lake near the Atlantic coast.

 **Environmentalists also fear that international trade laws may work against them. If water is defined as a commodity, treaties such as GATT and the North American Free Trade Agreement may prevent Canada's government from interfering with exports.**

 "Once one province, or any province, starts exporting water, the GATT rules say Canada has to keep the tap running," said Maude Barlow, head of the anti-globalization group Council of Canadians.

 "NAFTA said that we have to treat American and Mexican investors exactly the same as we treat Canadian investors and already we have two NAFTA challenges," she said.

 **"Just over a year ago, a company in Alaska was given permission to export water, and the province of Newfoundland is still seriously looking at a proposal to take water from Gisborne Lake. We know that there is an investor in Quebec who has started a company to export water from the Great Lakes."**

 Barlow claims that there are very real preparations by corporations to enter the world market for water. "We've got water, but we've got no legislation. We have underestimated a potential threat," she said.

 "There are Canadian business people who think Canada can become the OPEC of the water business, because we have such a huge supply. The signs are there that there's a lot of financial interest, but we haven't had a debate on the problem," Barlow concluded.