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**GUARDING THE GREAT LAKES**

by Tim Anderson

Policy-Makers in Great Lakes States Are Considering How to Better Protect the Lakes from Threats of Water Exports, Development and Environmental Contaminants.

As water levels dropped to near record lows in parts of the Great Lakes this summer, people around the region were reminded of 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 who 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, 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.**

THREAT OF EXPORTED WATER

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," said Michael Donahue, executive director of the Great Lakes Commission, a binational agency that represents the interests of the 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 said. "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 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.

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, said Minnesota Sen. Cal Larson, a Republican from Fergus Falls.

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 said.

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. Engler said, "Water projects will be approved only if they do more good than harm."**