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Lakes water forecast: Tension high, and Michigan partly to blame

BY TINA LAM • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

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Climate change and more droughts in coming decades could add to pressure to ship Great Lakes water to thirsty regions, at the same time global warming could cause the lakes to shrink, creating a nightmare scenario, said Peter Annin, author of an influential book on the politics of Great Lakes water.

The proposed Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River compact among the eight Great Lakes states and two Canadian provinces, designed to prevent diversions and require prudent water use, has only a 50-50 chance of passing, Annin said. A handful of legislators in Wisconsin and Ohio have blocked it in their states.

Annin, who wrote "Great Lakes Water Wars" in 2006, will speak today at a symposium on the politics and future of water in the region at Wayne State University. Registration for the speech is closed.

Most studies suggest the levels of the lakes could drop as much as 5 feet later this century with global warming, he said.

Tension over water is already high in the lakes states, and Michigan is partly to blame, he said.

"Michigan has the image of being a water cowboy," he said. The state agreed to limit new large-scale water uses in 1985 but didn't do so until two years ago. Former Gov. John Engler also vetoed a request by Lowell, Ind., a town 5 miles outside the basin, to use Lake Michigan water in the early 1990s. At the same time, he allowed farmers in the Thumb to divert even more water from Lake Huron for irrigation, a move no other governor could veto since it was inside the basin. Michigan ranks last in the region in conserving and respecting water use, Annin said.

"Michigan arguably has the most to gain from the compact because it's fully in the basin, yet its hypocrisy over past Great Lakes water use and regulation, combined with its veto, is bogging down the compact in other states like Wisconsin," he said.

Other states still resent Michigan and fear its veto. It's the only state that will never need to ask permission for a diversion for its communities, since they're all inside the basin.

Tapping water from the lakes for uses inside the basin is more acceptable because much of the water that's used ultimately is returned to the lakes.

Michigan and three other states - Wisconsin, Ohio and Pennsylvania - have yet to pass the Great Lakes compact, although Michigan and Pennsylvania are expected to approve it eventually.

The compact was negotiated by the eight regional governors in 2005, and all eight legislatures must pass it, as must Congress, for it to become law. New York, Indiana, Minnesota and Illinois have passed it. It would provide stronger, more constitutional prohibitions on diversion to states outside the Great Lakes watershed than exist now.

The lakes, which hold 18% of the fresh surface water on the planet, could become the targets of the water-hungry in the future.

On Monday, Ohio's lieutenant governor suggested that Great Lakes states might need to sell water in the coming decades. He backtracked Tuesday, saying he and the governor both oppose any diversion outside the basin.

Last fall, presidential candidate Bill Richardson, governor of dry New Mexico, raised regional hackles by saying states like Wisconsin were "awash in water" and a federal water policy was needed. He later reneged.



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While the compact bans new diversions of Great Lakes water beyond the basin, there are exceptions for communities in counties that straddle the basin, but any governor can veto such a diversion.

Annin said towns like Waukesha, Wis., in a county straddling the watershed, are worried that Michigan will veto diversions they want from Lake Michigan. Several key Wisconsin legislators, including one from Waukesha, oppose the compact because they fear it would strangle development. So far, they have convinced lawmakers to block passage of the compact.

In Ohio, a key senator has so far blocked the legislation over fears the compact takes away property owners' rights to use groundwater.

Noah Hall, a Wayne State law professor who helped negotiate the compact, said many of those legislators who oppose the compact are wrong about its effects, and citizens strongly support the compact. He's slightly more optimistic than Annin about the pact's future.

"I'd say it's better than 50-50," he said. He said Michigan has made new efforts to regulate water withdrawals in the last two years and no longer ranks at the bottom of Great Lakes states.

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