

SUCKING THE GREAT LAKES DRY

NEGLECT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BAD POLITICS THREATEN FRESH WATER IN THE GREAT LAKES

A perfect storm is brewing around the Great Lakes, the world's largest fresh water body, that could unsettle a vital economy that accounts for half of U.S. and Canadian trade.

Driven by water neglect, bad politics and the subversive work of climate change, this worrisome cascade has already begun in the dry U.S. Midwest, where farmers drained the 175,000-square-mile Ogallala aquifer in order to grow corn and soybeans.

As a consequence, parched places like North Dakota are now making contradictory water demands. While the state is clamouring for clean water imports from Lake of the Woods, it wants to export parasite-ridden waters from Devils Lake into Lake Winnipeg.

Climate change, meanwhile, has reduced snow packs in the Rocky Mountains and cut the Missouri River's water flow by a third. The Missouri, in turn, feeds the mighty Mississippi, which carries a third of U.S. water-borne traffic. Whenever drought lowers water levels, folks in the Mississippi basin go to Chicago with buckets in hand.

EXCEEDING WITHDRAWAL LIMITS

Chicago and the Mississippi have developed a real taste for Great Lakes water. For almost a hundred years, Chicago has been diverting two billion gallons of water a day out of the basin to cool five million people and to power plants. Instead of returning this precious resource to the Great Lakes basin, the city flushes it into the Mississippi. Although the Supreme Court has limited Chicago's take, the city routinely exceeds its legal withdrawal limits.

Chicago isn't alone in eyeing the Great Lakes. Careless water budgeting has left several cities straddling the basin with big water deficits. Many are now pumping groundwater so hard they are reversing water flows to the Great Lakes.

Other storm clouds are gathering in the U.S. Southwest, where unsustainable population growth has reduced the Colorado River to a dribble and where even the U.S. government admits that the long-term "overdraft of groundwater resources" is not sustainable. Yet political power is now flowing away from the Great Lakes to the desert. As history shows, desert politicians respond to water scarcity by increasing the supply. In the U.S., that means taking water from the Great Lakes, home to 95 per cent of that country's fresh water.

WATER FOR SALE

To date, Ontario is the only Great Lakes jurisdiction that understands the implications – it simply has the most to lose. It is not only the largest consumer of water in the basin, but also the most densely populated. Tellingly, most of its immigrants even come from water-poor nations.

This explains why last summer, Ontario redrafted the Great Lakes Annex 2001 Implementing Agreements, a flawed binational management scheme for the Great Lakes. Incredibly, this compact permitted unlimited diversions from the Great Lakes and amounted to a "water for sale" sign. The water management initiative's latest version, which eight U.S. states and Ontario and Quebec submitted for public comment this summer, is a vast improvement, but it is not yet leak-proof.

Although the latest version generally says no to diversions out of the basin, it contains two critical loopholes. First, it omits the Chicago diversion from a set of generally rigorous withdrawal standards. Chicago and the Mississippi Basin will ask for more water, and their demands should be governed by rules that discourage bad water management outside of it.

GROUNDWATER THEFT

The new agreement also allows counties that straddle the basin divide to pipe water out of the Great Lakes. Arbitrary political boundaries, however, have a habit of becoming elastic ones. The basin's citizens must insist that the new deal respect the basin's natural boundaries defined by the height of land between the Great Lakes and Mississippi drainage basins.

Using these natural boundaries, the region could end the theft of groundwater by straddling communities in the following way: give them a five-year period to apply for piped water, provided they can prove a real need, balance their water budgets, and return the treated waste water.

Without these changes, denizens of the Great Lakes could soon be hit by a constellation of extreme political and ecological events that may ultimately bleed the region of its true source of wealth: water.

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