

04/10/2004
COMMENTARY LAST
EDIT

The last time Canadians got really upset about water diversions from the Great Lakes was in 1998. An Ontario company was given a permit to export water by tanker ship to the Orient. After a public outcry and diplomatic objections the permit was cancelled.

That incident focussed attention on the neglected, leaky, and antiquated water laws and policies on both sides of the Great Lakes. Without firm rules how can we hope to protect these vital lakes? They're home to one-fifth of the world's freshwater and the source of drinking water for 25% of Canadians.

Fortunately, six years after that crisis we have before us two draft agreements. Some environmentalists in Canada are nervous about these agreements. They think they'll set up a regulatory framework that will amount to a license to export water.

I disagree. I've been privy to some of the complex negotiations among Ontario and Quebec and the eight American states that border the Great Lakes. To me having rules on water use is far better than the empty reservoir we have now.

There's no doubt pressure is growing on the Great Lakes. The millions of people who live around them are thirsty. Near neighbours and others further away, that have already depleted their groundwater stocks, are eyeing these seemingly limitless reserves.

It's true that Ontario and Quebec have already strengthened their laws to prevent future diversions

from the Canadian side of the Lakes. But will this be enough? No similar laws have yet been passed in the eight Great Lake states.

We risk more crisis management and purely political decisions if we walk away from the table as some are suggesting. And there's little guarantee that Ontario and Quebec will be at the table or even consulted when the inevitable proposals to increase the flows from the Chicago Diversion into the Mississippi River are made.

To be sure, with these agreements the devil is in the details and Canadians must examine them. But rather than ideologically rejecting the notion of formal rules we can make recommendations to strengthen these drafts. They could give us the first legally binding regime to protect the water of the Great Lakes. They will establish a rigorous set of ecological conditions to prevent further harm from large water withdrawals. Not only that...they will give the public a role in water-use decisions and they will mandate day-to-day water management improvements in the Great Lakes. It all adds up to a strong deterrent to those who want to turn on more taps.

The outcome of these efforts could act as a model for other provinces that share boundary waters with the U.S. and for other countries sharing water. Binding water agreements could resolve conflicts before they escalate into strife, crisis and scarcity. Which legacy will we leave in a water short world?

For Commentary, I'm Sarah Miller in Toronto.

James Wark
Commentary Producer Canadian Broadcasting Network
(780) 468-7420
(780) 468-7421 fax

james_wark@cbc.ca

