

Beyond Levels and Flows: Sustaining the Great Lakes for the Next Millennium

The International Joint Commission (IJC) was created by the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty Act to manage the shared boundary waters of the Great Lakes for their use as potable water, navigation and power generation. Early in the century, diversions into and out of the Great Lakes were engineered for these purposes. Control Boards were created to regulate levels and flows to adjust extreme highs and lows which caused conflicts among users. In the last two decades, the IJC held two separate references when high lake levels and proposals for diversions were causing conflicts. Many concerned residents attended hearings like the eight hearings that have scheduled for the month of March, 1999. Many very good recommendations came out of these references in 1985 and again in 1993 fairly reflecting the public's concerns and implying that most challenges for the Lakes were manageable. A summary of the 1985 recommendations is attached.

What is different now ?

The last several years of this century the citizens of the Great Lakes are seeing changes that indicate what life might be like for future generations of Great Lakes residents. Issues identified as "emerging" have fast become pressing for the Great Lakes. Failure to follow through with past recommendations has deepened historical problems.

The Great Lakes can no longer be considered a regional or a Canada - US resource. **Globalization is fast transforming the Great Lakes, holding over one fifth of the freshwater on the planet, into a resource ripe to feed the thirst of an increasingly water poor world.** Organizations like the Worldwatch Institute and the United Nations Environment and Development Program tell us that 54 countries are already facing severe water shortages that threaten food security for their people. Big business is banking on this growing crises and is looking to the Great Lakes region for profits. In the last few years private ventures have:

- proposed to export water by ocean going tankers from Lake Superior and the north shore of the St. Lawrence. While these proposals will not likely drain the Great Lakes, they have the potential to set a precedent under the free trade agreements which would entrench water as a commodity placing its control within the decision-making domains of trade tribunals away from the reach of government controls,
- proposed a flurry of bids to take over the management and control of water and wastewater treatment facilities in the basin,
- made a number of proposals for pipelines to move water from surface waters of the Great Lakes to communities previously reliant on groundwater, and;
- are intensifying extraction of Basin groundwater for unregulated bottled water businesses for sale and export.

This capture and creation of markets for water by the private sector raises many questions about our ability to control and determine the fate of our water in the next century.

Challenge the premise that bulk tanker exports are a panacea for solving the water problems now threatening many developing countries. Water being shipped halfway around the world will only be affordable to the privileged and will lead to inequity between the rich and poor. Call upon the Commissioners to reject the notion of water exports.

Urge the IJC to show leadership by setting an example by forging the most rigorous watershed protection regime in the world. Ask them to leave parochial times behind them to reach out to areas far beyond the Great Lakes to help them instill similar programs to protect their own dwindling water resources. We have a lot of water wisdom in the Great Lakes. Much of it resides with first nations who plan for seven generations. Let's make this the last reference that is ever needed on protecting Great Lakes water. It should become the first principle of all future actions.