

Great Lakes water diversion

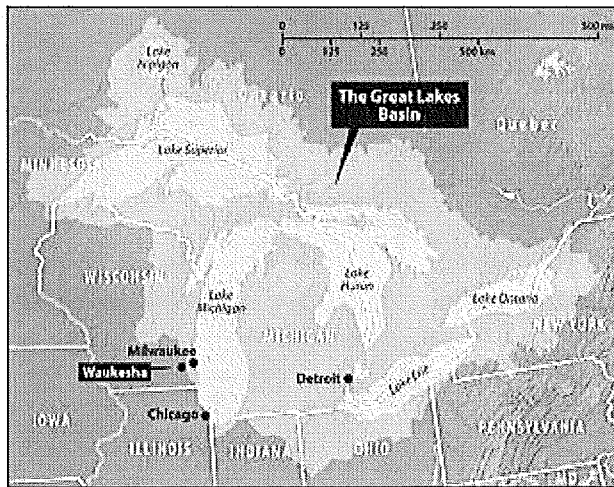
By [Doug Hissom](#) · June 20, 2012 · [No comments](#)



The first proposed diversion of Great Lakes water since the historic Great Lakes Water Resources Compact was approved is trying to quietly work its way through the labyrinth of the approval process. But that won't be for long.

The City of Waukesha, Wis. (pop. 70,718), which sits on the western edge of Metropolitan Milwaukee, has a bad problem with its water supply—radium. Radium is a cancer causer that gets into the water as aquifers get sucked dry.

Waukesha and its surrounding communities in the next county west of Milwaukee County has been the metro area's preeminent place for economic growth in recent decades as the white flight from the big city settled west in their suburban style homes, with suburban style yards and the accompanying water consumption that comes with unrestrained growth needed to support all that. Officials ignored the fact that the water was going bad if they didn't come up with a way to conserve or dig new wells.



But its water supply is clearly inadequate for such growth. And it has been for more than 20 years. But Waukesha continued to encourage building homes, businesses and factories with an eye toward leaving the problem for the next guys. It was an easy pitch given the perceived fears of doing business in Milwaukee, one of the poorest cities in the country.

But a federal court has ordered that Waukesha has until 2018 to lower the levels of radium in its water to protect public health.

Waukesha has always thought its ace in the hole when it comes to fresh water was the fact that Lake Michigan's plethora of clean, fresh water was less than 15 miles away. Now that plan faces an arduous political row to hoe. Waukesha's issue for the next few years will be layered in politics, but the bedrock of the issue is geologic.

Waukesha happens to be on the other side of a hill that determines which way the water will flow after it has been used. Waukesha's waste water will head west toward the Mississippi River where, if the hill was mere miles west, Waukesha's water would run back to Lake Michigan.

Hence the Great Lakes Water Resources Compact of 2008. It was written up and agreed to by eight states, two provinces, Congress and the president to prevent water diversions from the Great Lakes that would not return the water in some way back to the lakes. The idea is to prevent the water from becoming an exportable, non-replenishable commodity. Discussion of the compact got to the earnest level when it was discovered in the late 1990s that an Ontario company was sending shiploads of water to China in ocean-going freighters.

An exemption in the compact, however, could apply to Waukesha: If the community is in a county that straddles the basin divide, it can ask for water. (It was called the Waukesha Clause during compact negotiations.)

The bottom line is that Waukesha, as are many other cities in the same position, is thirsty for lake water to keep the projects going. The lakes have long been eyed as an integral

part of the growth of the U.S. economy. In the seminal 1972 book on growth and the environment "Limits to Growth," one way the lakes were viewed was as a way to get water to the western U.S. by a slurry pipeline which would also send coal to the Great Lakes power plants.

Waukesha has come up with schemes to get the water back to Lake Michigan, but the science of their strategies remains in question. It rejects the option of digging new wells and installing radium treatment equipment, which would cost up to \$189 million, and instead says it could spend \$169 million on a questionable plan to return the water to Lake Michigan. Environmentalists and state regulators are dubious. It would take five years to build the system.

The first political hurdle Waukesha must achieve is making a deal with a municipality that has access to Lake Michigan water and can pump it west. A key player in that plan is Milwaukee. Waukesha is waving \$3 million a year and later \$4.3 million a year at its neighbor to pay for the water. But, as predicted by "Limits to Growth," the politics here is more than just \$3 million in annual pay-offs.

Milwaukee officials remain wary that Waukesha will use the water to continue unfettered development at a much more insidious cost to Milwaukee. It also wants that city to show what it's doing toward allowing moderate and low income people to live there. Milwaukee's suburbs have long been loathe to let low income and minorities in general from living in their tony confines. While the big city has a 55 percent minority population, nearly all of its suburbs are in the signal digits on that figure. Waukesha's minority population is about 8 percent.

One of the conditions Milwaukee officials want to consider is what that city is doing to promote residency and job creation for low income and minorities. As part of a request by Waukesha to be heard by the Milwaukee City Council this week, it was asked to provide that information and tell Milwaukee council members if it intends to maintain mass transit subsidies so that Milwaukee residents can get to jobs in the suburbs.

It was also asked why it included nearby towns in its proposal that would then buy Waukesha water. As of a week before the Milwaukee decision to negotiate, Waukesha has turned over insufficient information.

The city has said if Milwaukee doesn't go along with the idea, it can make a deal with two other communities along the lake—Racine and Oak Creek—that have water plants. But it doesn't have concrete plans to get the water back to the lake from there.

After Wisconsin's regulatory agencies approve the plan, the governors of the other seven Great Lakes states must sign off. Who knows what deals need to be struck for that? Water border wars could erupt. The state of Michigan received regional ire for vetoing a water request from an Indiana city under the terms of a previous Great Lakes agreement.

What this really represents is a suburban city, blinded by the money of economic growth, remained short-sighted in missing the “what will happen down the road” factor, and is now looking for a quick bailout by holding its poor neighbor to the wall with the promise of millions. And in the long run the poor neighbor continues to suffer, unable to truly cash in on the gold that is water.

It looks like a scenario that can play out along the shores of most Great Lakes states.

It’s going to be a hard sell for Waukesha. And if this, being the first test case of the compact, passes muster with all the layers of parties involved, then it looks like a waterfall of similar plans will be on the table shortly.

About the author



Doug Hissom writes a weekly environmental column for Baltimore Post-Examiner. He has covered local and state politics in Wisconsin for more than 20 years. Over the course of that time he was publisher, editor, news editor, managing editor and senior writer at the Shepherd Express weekly paper in Milwaukee. He also covered education and environmental issues extensively. He ran the UWM Post in the mid-1980s, winning a Society of Professional Journalists award as best non-daily college newspaper. An avid outdoors person he regularly takes extended paddling trips in the wilderness, preferring the hinterlands of northern Canada and Alaska. After a bet with a bunch of sailors, he paddled across Lake Michigan in a canoe. [Contact the author.](#)