

Agreement scores new, concrete protections for Michigan water resources

Bipartisan pact not perfect, but a key win for Michigan's citizens; earns endorsement from Great Lakes, Great Michigan coalition

June 23, 2008 Lansing, MI -- A bipartisan agreement announced today establishes important and concrete protections for Michigan's streams and makes water conservation an integral part of the state's water stewardship efforts.

The deal, reached after years of negotiation and research, was endorsed today by Great Lakes, Great Michigan – a coalition of more than 70 civic, environmental, business and sporting organizations.

“This package is a signal of the legislature’s commitment to protecting our world-class water resources,” said James Clift of the Michigan Environmental Council. **“With other states and nations increasingly eyeing Great Lakes water for diversion or profit, it is critical we double our effort to protect and preserve our water for future generations.”**

The bipartisan compromise left some shortcomings, but keeps intact core principles:

- Approves the eight-state Great Lakes Compact against large scale water diversions (Michigan is the 7th state to approve it)

- Ensures that users do not excessively harm aquatic resources by taking too much water

- Adopts conservation principles to be utilized by water users

- Adds public input into decisions about large-scale water uses that might impact local ecosystems

“Yesterday, not a drop of Michigan’s precious water was adequately protected from withdrawal or diversion,” said Dr. Grenetta Thomassey of Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council. **“With these laws, 75 percent of streamflows are safe from being siphoned away; and the remainder are subject to rules ensuring availability to business, industry, farmers, and citizens for reasonable use.”**

Michigan is the only state entirely within the Great Lakes watershed, which contains almost 20 percent of the planet's fresh surface water. Increasing demand for fresh water is expected to ratchet up pressure to divert water from the watershed, where it would be lost forever to the Great Lakes system.

Recent months have seen notables including a Democratic presidential candidate and Ohio's lieutenant governor suggest that water might be siphoned from the lakes.

"We have no intention of letting our water be taken to subsidize sprawl in Atlanta or irrigate golf courses in Arizona," said Gayle Miller of the Sierra Club's Michigan Chapter. "This is a firm step toward saying, 'no'."

The legislation uses a combination of a new scientific geographic information system-based water withdrawal assessment tool along with other criteria to determine whether large-scale water withdrawals within the state are harmful.

"To our knowledge, no other state in the country is using science to protect water resources in this way; and no state has protected as much of their water resources as we are doing with these laws," said Clift. "This is a pioneering effort."

Great Lakes, Great Michigan coalition members said they would regroup in coming months to fight for additional protections not included in the package.

"We are extremely disappointed that the legislature failed to strengthen our important public trust protections, which affirms that water is a public resource that belongs to Michiganders and not to corporations or profit-takers," said Cyndi Roper of Clean Water Action. "We intend to revisit this issue."

Other tweaks, such as adjusting allowable streamflow reductions in certain types of rivers, may also be necessary in the future.

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