The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact

Sharing Impacts, Sharing Benefits, Sharing Responsibilities

Photo: National Park Service

In January 2007,
Senate Bill 50 (SB50) and
House Bill 375 (HB375)
were introduced into the Illinois General Assembly.
These bills seek adoption of
The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact
("the Compact").
The Compact is a binding agreement among all Great Lakes Governors
to conserve, protect, restore and improve
the waters and water dependent resources of
the Great Lakes Basin.

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To achieve these goals, the Compact includes standards for approving large water withdrawals, requires the sharing of data and knowledge, and adopts ecosystem-based, adaptive management protocols. However, because the Compact is an interstate compact (i.e. contract), each Great Lakes State must first adopt the Compact, and Congress must give its consent, before it will be a legally enforceable document.

Illinois, along with Michigan, Wisconsin and Indiana, shares the shores and waters of Lake Michigan. The second largest of the Great Lakes, the Lake Michigan basin is home to more than ten million people; six million of those people are Illinois residents. Lake Michigan is only one of five Great Lakes; its waters and shores are only part of the larger Great Lakes Basin. The Basin's drainage area marks the true "boundaries" of the Great Lakes vast ecosystem (see map). Within the Basin region live 33 million people who rely upon, and benefit from, living close to the world's largest and most unique surface freshwater system.

As one of the eight Great Lakes States, Illinois shares in the multitude of environmental and economic benefits the Great Lakes ecosystem provides to the States and to the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Great Lakes waters support multibillion dollar economies such as commercial fishing and shipping. One third of the Great Lakes Basin area is used for agricultural purposes. Recreational boaters, anglers, campers and other visitors also contribute several billion dollars annually to Great Lakes States economies.

Habitat diversity in the Great Lakes Basin supports a multitude of flora and fauna and provides the base for Basin ecosystem health. Coastal wetlands act as nesting, nursery, feeding, and resting areas for fish, birds and other wildlife; rivers and streams support aquatic and terrestrial species, and contribute water and nutrients to the Lakes; upland forest areas are home for wildlife from bears to white-tailed deer.

Water is life.

In the Great Lakes Basin, this finite and essential resource is being impacted and threatened by a multitude of causes. Examples of the many threats to Basin waters and water dependant species are as close as your newspaper's headlines:

"Lake Superior near record-low levels,"

December 2, 2006, Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune
http://www.startribune.com.

Lake Superior late-autumn waters levels are the lowest they have been in eight decades. Lower water levels impact the amount of cargo ships can carry, which affect the cost of the onboard commodities. Reduced water amounts in feeder streams are already impacting instream trout and salmon spawning areas.

"Great Lakes treated like great big sewer, report says,"

November 29, 2006, Reuters
http://today.reuters.com/news/.

A report by The Sierra Legal Defense Fund estimates 24 billion gallons of sewage enters the Great Lakes annually. Impacts from these discharges are broad in scope, from affecting the health of fish and wildlife to contamination of beaches and supply of fish for human consumption.

Photo: Jil M. Swearingen, USDI National Park Service

"Plant attacks local beaches,"

November 26, 2006, Bayshore Broadcasting, Owen Sound, Ontario
www.radioowensound.com.

In addition to the more well known invasive species, such as zebra mussels, invasive plants are affecting Great Lakes water dependent ecosystems. The "common reed" is taking over areas of Lake Huron's coast. As it spreads into coastal wetlands, the common reed impedes normal wetland functions including water filtration, and the availability of reproductive and nesting areas for fish and other wildlife.

"A mirage called Lake Michigan,"

September 4, 2006, the Chicago Daily Herald
http://www.dailyherald.com.

Discusses the human and environmental factors threatening the sustainability of Lake Michigan's water supply.

"Fish virus could limit shipping."

November 18, 2006, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel http://www.jsonline.com.

The viral hemorrhagic septicemia, or VHS, was first reported in the Great Lakes in 2005. The virus has killed thousands of fish in Lakes Ontario and Erie, affecting commercial and recreational fisheries. The virus may also impact shipping if restrictions or bans are placed on shipping lanes.

"U.S.-Canada teamwork needed to prevent Great Lakes spills: IJC report,"

October 10, 2006, Associated Press, reported at http://www.canada.com.

There have been hundreds of intentional and accidental discharges into Great Lakes waters since 1990, impacting water quality and the drinking water supply of U.S. and Canadian residents.

Compact adoption in Illinois is necessary because, as a Great Lakes State, our activities have the potential to degrade and adversely affect this unique freshwater system. As a Great Lakes State, we must share in the responsibility for protecting this natural resource and ensuring its sustainable use. As a Compact member, Illinois will be part of the solution, helping to achieve sustainable management of Great Lakes waters and water dependant resources for now and for the future.

Photo: Sara E. Jackson, National Wildlife Federation

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