

Great Lakes Leaders Approve Waukesha Water Diversion

Written by Abby Kuranz, WiscCIC

Tuesday, 21 June 2016 15:33 - Last Updated Tuesday, 21 June 2016 16:05

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/lake-michigan-shore-s5.jpg>



Wisconsin environmental groups' concerns remain; modified diversion plan will require vigilance.

CHICAGO, IL - A council representing the eight Great Lakes states voted on Tuesday, June 21st to allow Waukesha unprecedented access to Lake Michigan as its drinking water source. It's an extremely long first step that comes with some huge relief for Waukesha officials.

The city of 70,000 west of Milwaukee won unanimous approval Tuesday from eight states that are members of a regional compact designed to prevent water raids from afar.

"Obviously, I'm very, very happy. This is something the City of Waukesha has worked on for a very, very long time," said Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly.

Waukesha is only 17 miles from Lake Michigan but lies just outside the Great Lakes watershed boundary. It needed unanimous approval from the compact states to draw water from the lake. Reilly said the application process began six years ago. The city has actually been pumping water from deep wells that draw from the Lake Michigan basin for years.

The groundwater wells the community currently relies on are contaminated with radium. The city plans to take more than eight million gallons a day from the lake. It vows it will return as much water as it uses.

Regarding the decision made by the Compact Council today:

The members of the Wisconsin Compact Implementation Coalition (CIC) appreciate the

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seriousness with which members of the Great Lakes Regional Body and Compact Council undertook their responsibility to review Waukesha's diversion application. We especially appreciate how the Regional Body and Compact Council heeded the concern, echoed by tens of thousands of Great Lakes residents, that Waukesha's inclusion of neighboring communities in its original application did not meet the requirements of the Great Lakes Compact. We have no doubt that the extent of public engagement across the Great Lakes states, together with the advocacy efforts of our regional environmental partners, contributed to improvements in the diversion proposal ultimately approved by the Compact Council.

We remain concerned, however, that the Compact Council did not fully resolve other flaws in Waukesha's proposal to ensure that this precedent-setting application meets all of the rigorous requirements laid out in the Great Lakes Compact. We continue to believe the Compact Council should have denied Waukesha's proposal to divert Great Lakes water until the remaining areas of non-compliance were remedied.

Remaining concerns:

While we acknowledge that Waukesha must address the radium in its drinking water, we maintain Waukesha can safely meet its community's drinking water needs now and well into the future without a diversion from the Great Lakes. In fact, in light of the conditions approved today that rightly reduce the area served and the amount of water originally requested by Waukesha, the evidence that Waukesha has a reasonable water supply alternative is even stronger. Regrettably, the Compact Council also has chosen to leave unaddressed a number of other concerns voiced by our coalition and citizens across the Great Lakes basin, including lack of a sufficient monitoring plan for return flow through the Root River, no reduction in the maximum amount of water Waukesha can draw from the Great Lakes from 16.7 million gallons per day, and failure to require a new needs analysis with the reduced diversion area.

Moving forward:

In the coming weeks, we will review the specific conditions adopted by the Compact Council today to assess critical shortfalls and appropriate next steps. We intend to hold the Compact Council and its member states accountable to their obligations to monitor and enforce the conditions under which the application was approved. Effective implementation of the Great Lakes Compact will hinge on rigorous enforcement of the conditions approved today.

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We will continue to watchdog both the City of Waukesha and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources as they implement the approved diversion request, to ensure all conditions placed on the approval by the Compact Council are carried out in keeping with the spirit and the letter of the Great Lakes Compact. We expect that the Council will intervene if Waukesha and Wisconsin break the trust extended to them through this approval by failing to meet any one of the requirements the Council has outlined today. And, we reserve the right to take action ourselves to compel compliance with the Compact Council's requirements.

We remain open to any and all good-faith requests for regional approval under the straddling county exception to the general ban on diversions under the Great Lakes Compact. We will approach any such diversion proposal in the future with the same open minds with which we approached Waukesha's proposal, with the understanding that the Great Lakes Compact was created as a genuine safeguard to protect our Great Lakes for future generations. The exception for outside-of-the-basin diversions was intended to be a last resort for truly extraordinary circumstances, a bar Waukesha's proposal does not meet.