



The Great Lakes' water

Liquid gold

A long-declining region considers its most important asset

May 20th 2010 | CHICAGO | From *The Economist* print edition

Coming to a city near you

FOR decades the Great Lakes region has seen a slow ebb. Factories have moved abroad or, more insulting, to the South. Residents have fled to sunnier states. But the lakes themselves remain; and while much of America is regularly afflicted by drought, they hold enough water to submerge the entire country. Now the Great Lakes states are reconsidering their main asset. Water, the boosters say, will bring prosperity once more.

The first task is to protect the water itself. Environmentalists raise the spectre of Central Asia's Aral Sea, all but drained by Soviet irrigation projects. Nightmares have been fed by radical plans such as a scheme in the 1990s to ship water to Asia. More insidious threats include climate change and thirsty cities just beyond the Great Lakes Basin—death by 1,000 straws, according to Peter Annin's "The Great Lakes Water Wars". An important protection came in 2008, when George Bush signed the Great Lakes Compact. This agreement bars new diversions beyond the Great Lakes Basin, with few exceptions.

Great Lakes states continue to have their own unique water problems, however. Illinois is exempt from the Compact. Since 1900, when engineers reversed the flow of the Chicago river, Illinois has sent Lake Michigan water down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico. After decades of lawsuits, in 1967 the Supreme Court capped Illinois's diversion at 2.1 billion gallons (8 billion litres) of water each day. The squabbling continues—most recently, Michigan tried to close the diversion to keep invading carp from reaching the lakes. But the long-term challenge for Illinois is to stay within the Supreme Court's limit as the population grows. Twelve suburbs, a record, are asking for lake water. As aquifers are drained, more suburbs beyond the basin will ask for it.

Planners are struggling to cut waste now to prevent scarcity later. "We see what appears to be this endless ocean of water, so I think we are spoiled," explains Tim Loftus of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP). Chicago is trying to become more efficient, replacing leaky pipes and installing water meters. In March CMAP recommended more than 240 measures to improve regional water management. But there is little money to implement them.

Broader demands and hopes for water, meanwhile, are playing out just north of Chicago in Wisconsin. The Compact will face its first test in Waukesha, west of Milwaukee. Waukesha sits beyond the Great Lakes Basin, but its county straddles the basin's border. As *The Economist* went to press Waukesha was to become the first city beyond the basin to

Comment

Recommend

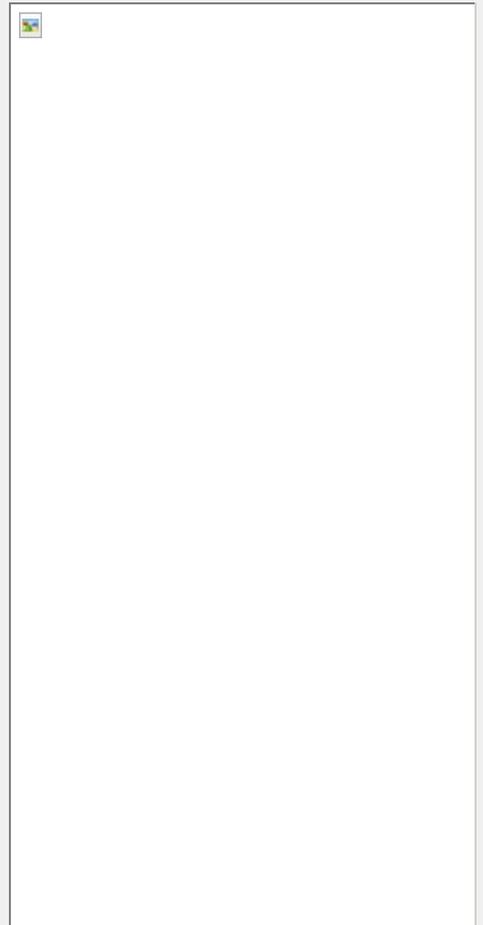
E-mail

Share

Print

Reprints & permissions

Advertisement



Products & events

Stay informed today and every day

Subscribe to *The Economist's* free e-mail newsletters and alerts.

Get e-mail newsletters

Subscribe to *The Economist's* latest article postings on Twitter

Follow *The Economist* on Twitter

See a selection of *The Economist's* articles, events, topical videos and debates on Facebook.

Follow *The Economist* on Facebook

apply for lake water. (The city promises to send treated water back.) All eight Great Lakes states must approve the plan. If Waukesha succeeds, predicts David Naftzger of the Council of Great Lakes Governors, other cities may set their straws on the lakes, too.

Milwaukee itself exemplifies the hope that water may not only support growth, but catalyse it. Other cities want the lakes to attract new tourists and retired folk. In Milwaukee a three-year-old Water Council, led by local businessmen, intends to make the city a "World Water Hub" for water technology; the United Nations has already given it an official designation. On May 13th Wisconsin's governor approved \$50m for a new local graduate programme in freshwater science.

Another approach is less esoteric. Milwaukee wants to raise water rates for existing customers to support its cash-strapped water supplier. (Milwaukee's water would still remain some of America's cheapest, though.) The city may also lower rates for new companies, a bid to lure some of the water-guzzling industries, like brewing, which once helped Milwaukee thrive. If residents from parched states follow, so much the better. Locals are squabbling over the plans. The sunbelt would love to have such fights.

Readers' comments

The Economist welcomes your views.

 [Be the first to comment on this article](#)

Classified ads

Discover
the Health
of Nations →



[About *The Economist* online](#) | [About *The Economist*](#) | [Media directory](#) | [Staff books](#) | [Career opportunities](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Subscribe](#)

[\[+\] Site feedback](#)

Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2010. All rights reserved. [Advertising info](#) | [Legal disclaimer](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#)

[Help](#)