

Chicago suburbs covet Lake Michigan water

CHICAGO _ In what could be the state's largest collective gulp of Lake Michigan water in nearly two decades, 10 suburbs are seeking approval to tap the vast but closely guarded natural resource.

With groundwater supplies drying up and vulnerable to contamination, the Lake County, Ill., communities that now rely on wells are casting envious eyes on that tantalizingly close supply _ the sixth largest freshwater lake in the world. They propose spending \$250 million to lay about 57 miles of pipe and take other steps that would bring Lake Michigan water to the western part of Lake County.

It would be the largest diversion since the early 1990s and may spur criticism from other states that adjoin the Great Lakes, which brim with nearly 20 percent of the world's supply of freshwater. The move comes at the same time that Michigan and other states are battling Illinois in the U.S. Supreme Court over whether it's doing enough to halt the potential invasion of Asian carp into Lake Michigan.

The carp fight has no bearing on Lake County's request for water, but the application could fuel further animosities _ especially because other states face much more stringent barriers to Great Lakes water than Illinois.

Turning on the spigot is still years away, but preliminary hearings before the Illinois Department of Natural Resources began in Chicago on Wednesday and are scheduled to continue Thursday. The applicants are Antioch, Fox Lake, Fox Lake Hills, Grandwood Park, Lake Villa, Lake Zurich, Lindenhurst, Long Grove, Volo and Wauconda.

"All indications are that the groundwater supply in Lake County is insufficient to meet demand in the future," the county's public works director, Peter Kolb, told state officials at Wednesday's hearing.

Under a 1967 U.S. Supreme Court decree, Illinois can remove up to 2.1 billion gallons per day from the lake, a cap that years ago was routinely surpassed. But conservation efforts over the past several years among communities that already take lake water give the state wriggle room to quench the thirst of others, officials said.

"Since 1994, we have essentially paid back what was a sizable 'water debt,'" said Daniel Injerd, the state DNR's chief of Lake Michigan management.

The ability of other states that adjoin the Great Lakes to tap into the water supply is governed by the 2008 Great Lakes Compact, signed by eight states and two Canadian provinces.

Although the Canadian oversight is only advisory, the compact requires that a community outside the Great Lakes basin get permission from all eight states _ including Illinois _ to use that resource. The community must also return water to the basin.

The high court ruling that affects Illinois allows the state to allocate whatever it wants as long as the total is under the cap. And it isn't required to return water to the lake.

Illinois officials say the state has a legal right to the water as long as it stays within the 2.1 billion gallon cap, and experts agree.

Even with nearly 200 area communities drawing water from the lake, Illinois is between 50 million and 75 million gallons per day under the cap, according to a draft of a new study by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

Tim Loftus, the agency's project director, said that's a good sign that the Lake County communities will win approval from the state. The project would relieve pressure on the deep aquifer that supplies much of their groundwater, a long-standing goal, he said.

With the state near its daily limit, the 10 communities wanted to act before it was too late, said Antioch Trustee Michael Wolczyk.

"Now is the opportunity," Wolczyk said after Wednesday's meeting with state officials, adding that working together also makes the project more affordable.

Elsewhere around the Great Lakes, some communities clearly are envious of the comparatively easy path to Lake Michigan that the Lake County applicants enjoy.

Waukesha, Wis., about 15 miles west of Milwaukee, hopes to tap about 18.5 million gallons of water a day from the lake, about 20 miles away, said Mayor Larry Nelson.

The city of 68,000 residents is likely to become the first to ask the eight Great Lakes states for water. City officials will unveil details of their proposal to residents on Jan. 28, Nelson said.

The difference between getting approval from eight states and what the Lake County towns face isn't lost on Waukesha's mayor.

"It's certainly unfair," Nelson said. "But it's the reality."

Nelson supported the Great Lakes Compact, saying it will protect the resource from water-hungry communities farther away. He thinks the huge drain Chicago puts on the lake will actually help Waukesha's request.

By comparison, his community's request is a "drop in the bucket," he said.

Other states have become resigned to the much vaster allocation that the Supreme Court decree provides Illinois, according to one environmental advocate.

Dave Dempsey, author of "Great Lakes for Sale: From Whitecaps to Bottle Caps," said the massive diversion of water from the lake allowed in the Chicago region has been in place for so long that few argue about it anymore.

It began about a century ago, when the Chicago River was reversed so that it flowed away from the lake to protect the city's Lake Michigan drinking water from sewage. Eventually, the water withdrawn from Lake Michigan in the Chicago area makes its way to the Gulf of Mexico.

Dempsey said that in a perfect world, there would be no withdrawals from the Great Lakes.

"It's essentially subsidizing urban sprawl," Dempsey said.

"But in the Illinois case, it's a fait accompli," he said. "The real issue is looking down the road _ is Chicago going to be asking for more? That's when the fight is going to be hotly contested. It's not a matter of 'if'; it's a matter of 'when' because of population growth."

For Chris Berg, a Wauconda resident whose well was found to be contaminated in 2003, the idea of Lake Michigan water pouring through his faucets sounds like a good one.

"If there's ever an opportunity to hook up to Lake Michigan water, I think we should grab it," said Berg, who is now hooked up to the village of Wauconda's well.

"It's a more dependable source."

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