US Population Continues to Move Westward – Will Water from the Great Lakes Follow?
Carved out of ancient riverbeds by glaciers approximately 12 thousand years ago\(^1\), the Great Lakes are the world’s largest freshwater source. This will likely be the driving force for the resurgence of the City of Buffalo and other Rust Belt cities as climate change forces the migration of populations from flooded coastal areas or areas lacking water resources.

As we see the southwestern US suffer through wildfires, partially caused by the continuing drought conditions, there are again pressures to move waters from east to west. The Colorado River Basin, which supplies water to many major urban centers, is drying up as snow packs in the foothills of the Colorado are not replenished. As the water decreases in the river, it also is impacting major power generation sources at Lake Mead and Lake Powell. If the weather patterns do not change next year, it is a possibility that the water levels will not be high enough to generate power at Lake Powell in 2023\(^2\).

Since it has 21% of the world’s total fresh water, the Great Lakes would normally be considered the solution to the southwest’s water woes. Fortunately for the residents of the Western New York region, our lakes are...
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...to the southwest’s water woes. Fortunately for the residents of the Western New York region, our lakes are currently protected from the call for water from the west by the Great Lakes Agreement and Compact (GLAC). The GLAC, signed by the states and provinces bordering the Great Lakes, allow for water management within the watersheds that supply the Great Lakes. No transfers of water outside these watersheds are allowed by the compact unless all signatories agree to the transfer and only in counties that are partially within that watershed. This has happened twice since it was signed into law in 2008 and grandfathers in the permitted outflows of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal (built in 1900 and links Lake Michigan and the Des Planes River, a part of the Mississippi River Basin).

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The reason for the formation of the GLAC, ironically, had nothing to do with transferring waters to drier areas in the US or Canada. In 1998, the Province of Ontario granted a permit to the Nova Group to withdraw up to 427,000 gallons a day from Lake Superior. Their plan was to load ocean tankers to markets in East Asia. As soon as the word was out, it caused an international crisis which eventually led to the GLAC. It may have been the first proposal to ship water from the Great Lakes outside of North America, but certainly not the only proposal to move waters from the region.
In 1982, The US Army Corps of Engineers studied and denied a diversion of Great Lakes waters to recharge the Ogallala Aquifer, the source of water for many midwestern farms. Water from the Great Lakes was in the news in 2007 as part of a national water policy proposed by then presidential candidate Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico. In 2019, the State of Minnesota had a request to allow the removal of up to 500 million gallons of ground water from an area just outside the Great Lakes Basin that would be shipped by rail to the Southwestern US. This proposal shows that entrepreneurs consider this to be profitable as shipping petroleum is in today’s economy.

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The threats for water diversion are real, but the costs are staggering. A proposal to build a water pipeline from the Mississippi River to the Colorado River, to be used to replenish Colorado River reservoirs from floodwaters of the Mississippi, was estimated to be $23 billion in 2011\(^5\). This is less than half than the Chinese are expected to spend for a similar project (the South-North Water Diversion Project\(^6\)). The Chinese suffer from the same water disparities as we do in the United States for its fastest growing population areas like Beijing.

"The threats of water diversion need to be taken seriously."

But the threats of water diversion need to be taken seriously. Consider the two poster children of large body water diversions, the Aral Sea in Central Asia and the Salton Sea in California. The Aral Sea was once the fourth largest lake in the world until waters from rivers that fed into it were diverted by the Soviet Union for cotton farming. The Salton Sea was accidentally created from a breach in an early irrigation canal from the Colorado River to the agricultural Imperial Valley. For two years, while the breach was repaired, flood waters poured into a natural basin which turned a desert into an oasis for a time. But without their water sources, most of the Aral and Salton Seas are now a toxic dry basin from the salts left behind by the evaporation of the land locked waters.
Currently, the largest diversion of Great Lakes water could be as close as your supermarket shelves. The largest loophole in the GLAC is the allowance of water to be moved outside the basin in containers carrying less than 5.7 gallons. In 2017, a Nestle Ice Mountain water permit was issued to extend its extraction of groundwaters in Michigan. The company had already extracted over 3.4 billion gallons over 10 years from this site within the Great Lakes Watershed. But it’s not an isolated case. Locally, Mayer Brothers is one of dozens of bottlers within the watershed that package private labeled water for sale to regional and national retailers.

For now, the waters in Lake Superior and Lake Michigan are safe from large scale diversions due to the legal protection of the GLAC. But it is a law, and laws can be changed. The 2020 census again moved the geographic balance of power in the House of Representatives, with 4 seats moving to states west of the Mississippi and coming the states bordering the Great Lakes losing 5 seats. As the states along our inland sea lose the numerical clout in the Congress, and as climate stresses change the political landscape, the Governors of the Great Lakes need to reconsider the question of diversion, the looming threat to our greatest resource.

Interesting reads:

What could have happened to “solve” water woes across North America: The Abandoned Plan That Could Have Saved America From Drought (buzzfeednews.com)

A pet project of former socialist/marxist presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche: The Outline of NAWAPA (schillerinstitute.com)

Lead image: Lake Erie – Photo by Taylor Gilmore

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John Szalasny is someone who cares about our planet. Born too late to join in on the first wave of organized environmental action in the 60’s, I’m making up for lost time as I get nearer to retirement on various environmental concerns including the plastic waste crisis. Check out my Facebook group Bring NYC’s Styrofoam Ban to My Hometown! https://www.facebook.com/groups/2098476837129562/.

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