



TO: House Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment  
FROM: State Senator Robert Cowles  
DATE: April 18, 2008  
RE: Field Hearing on Lake Levels in the Great Lakes

Chairwoman Johnson and Members of the House Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment:

Thank you for holding a hearing on this important issue. The future health of the Great Lakes is tremendously important to the environment and economy of Wisconsin and the other Great Lakes states. Concerns over lake levels will grow as long as there is no Compact in place to protect the lakes from massive diversions to areas outside the Great Lakes Basin. Recently, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel published an editorial that said that action must be taken to protect the Great Lakes Basin from harmful diversions by passing our state's version of the Great Lakes Water Compact. I could not agree more. For the last year, members of the State Legislature have been working together as a Legislative Council Study Committee to produce our state's version of the Compact. I was a member of that Study Committee.

Legislators, including myself, worked with all the stakeholders on this important issue to continue the work of the Study Committee to produce a version of the Compact that will best serve Wisconsin. The bottom line is that our Great Lakes are precious. They need to be protected for a variety of reasons, from recreational use to economic development. Our Great Lakes are also coveted by other states outside of the Great Lakes Basin that grow more populous and thirstier by the day.

Just last week, Governor Doyle and leaders of the Senate and Assembly announced that they had reached an agreement on Compact language that will protect the Great Lakes as well as economic development opportunities. Hopefully, Wisconsin's Legislature will enact the Compact within the next few weeks.

A proposal to build a coal slurry pipeline with Lake Superior water from Duluth, Minnesota to the West in the 1980's and a proposal to ship Great Lakes water to China in 1998 are examples of the lengths people will go to get their hands on the largest body of fresh water in the world. Diverting water outside the Great Lakes only compounds the problems we are starting to see with the low water levels in the lake.

Under current rules, it is extremely difficult to remove water from the Great Lakes. And that is how it should be. But the current laws protecting the Great Lakes are so fragile that one arbitrary act of Congress or one bad court decision could leave our lakes defenseless from unrestricted diversions to the southern or western United States or other thirsty corners of the world.

It is very important for all of us in the Great Lakes Basin, stretching from Minnesota to Montreal, to ensure that our region controls the rules that will govern the use of Great Lakes water. The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact gives the Great Lakes states the power they need to protect the lakes.

The Compact uses strict guidelines to protect Great Lakes water. Water-strapped communities near the basin would be allowed to withdraw water from the Great Lakes only if they implement a way to return the water they use to the Great Lakes and have strong conservation plans. Transporting water far beyond the Great Lakes basin would be prohibited. Finally, the Compact promotes water conservation by all communities using Great Lakes water.

Adopting the Compact would lead to a more secure future for Wisconsin's tourism, development, and trade.

Great Lakes-related tourism generates millions of dollars every year. Failure to adopt the Compact could mean the disruption of ecosystems and a loss of habitat, which would in turn mean a loss of fish and a loss of tourism dollars. In an increasingly thirsty world our abundant supply of fresh water will become ever more sought after and will be a magnet for economic growth and jobs.

Our economy and environment will suffer if we turn our backs on this historic opportunity to protect the Great Lakes. Wisconsin is poised to do its part. After the remaining Great Lakes states enact the Compact, we will need you, our representatives in Congress, to ratify the Compact as soon as possible, to protect this valuable resource for generations to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Cowles', written in a cursive style.

ROBERT L. COWLES