

THE NEW POLITICS OF GREAT LAKES WATER DIVERSION: A CANADA-MICHIGAN POLITICAL INTERFACE¹

At first glance, the troubling question of whether or not to divert the water of the Great Lakes to other water shortage areas of the nation appears to be, to paraphrase Hamlet, quite simple: to divert or not to divert, that is the question. And, despite the fact that the Great Lakes constitute 18% of the world's supply of fresh surface water and almost 95% of the U.S. fresh surface water, the uniform response the Great Lakes states through the 1980's has been equally simple: no diversion to other sections of the country for development purposes. Similarly, the position of Canada on water diversion according to the Consul General remains, "We are opposed to all diversions from the Great Lakes to meet the needs of communities outside the basin."²

While this no diversion policy may have been politically popular and useful for the Great Lakes states in the 1980's, the decade of the 1990's and beyond pose more difficult political issues. No longer is the mega diversion of Great Lakes water outside the region looming as the primary threat to the region's water supply. Rather this threat has been overshadowed by smaller diversion requests that may cumulatively form an equally formidable threat to Great Lakes levels. Furthermore, the states requesting these smaller diversions are not from other regions of the country but from portions of Great Lakes states that are outside the Great Lakes basin. (See Figure 1 depicting the Great Lakes basin)

In reality, the question of Great Lakes water diversion is an issue that is as politically complex as the ecoregions of the region shown in Figure 1. With the notable exception of Michigan, every Great Lakes state is only partially within the basin. Therefore, a diversion issue arises whenever any Great Lakes state requests to withdraw water from the basin to a region of their state outside the basin boundaries. Some of these states already are feeling internally-generated political pressures that have led them to request water diversion projects, threatening the symbolically united political stance of the region reflected in its anti-diversion

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²Charles, Anne. Letter to Governor John Engler. 14 August, 1991 concerning the proposed Lowell, Indiana diversion.