



Great Lakes Forever Fact Sheet: Water Supply & Consumption

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Water is a way of life in the Great Lakes region - from the groundwater that supplies our drinking water, to the Great Lakes and beautiful inland-lakes, rivers, wetlands and natural areas where our families go to swim, fish, boat, hike and relax. Water is the world's most precious natural resource and all of us in the Great Lakes region have a responsibility to defend it and the special places it provides so that they can be used and enjoyed for generations to come. Chicago's legendary architect, Daniel H. Burnham, appropriately referred to the lakes as "living water," water for life and water alive.

Misconceptions about where water comes from, increasing demand and disregard about where water goes after it's been used, pose a serious threat to the future of our Great Lake water resources. Great Lakes communities throughout the region have seen their groundwater supply diminished by unchecked development. Over-tapping inland groundwater can damage streams and wetlands that are an important part of the larger Great Lakes ecosystem. As these groundwater wells are tapped out, more communities are turning to the Great Lakes for their municipal supplies – a choice that threatens the future health and supply of fresh water in the Great Lakes drainage basin.

All of Chicago's nearly three million residents, and many from the surrounding suburbs, rely on Great Lakes water for life. Lake Michigan water withdrawals account for nearly half of all the water taken from the Great Lakes each year. Every day in Chicago, one billion gallons are processed for drinking, bathing, laundry, industry and so much more. However, due to the city's 1900 reversal of the Chicago River, Lake Michigan water used by the city is not returned to the lake. Instead, it flows out of the Great Lakes basin, to the Mississippi River and, ultimately, to the Gulf of Mexico. In fact, the reversal of the Chicago River accounts for approximately 2.1 billion gallons of water drained from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico every single day.

The Great Lakes drainage basin is a natural boundary that is determined by where gravity sends everything from rainwater to groundwater to "drain." Water flows into the Great Lakes from all the lands and waterways within the basin. Water withdrawals diverted to communities outside of the basin area can permanently pull water out of the natural Great Lakes watershed, harming the natural balance of water inflows and outflows and setting negative precedents for future exports and diversions. More pipelines into the Great Lakes aren't a solution for a region that is using groundwater faster than nature can replenish it.

Currently, the region does not have a sufficient conservation plan and regulatory structure to protect Great Lakes surface freshwater and groundwater supplies. The Council of Great Lakes Governors (which includes the Premiers of Ontario and Quebec) have made some progress on a management plan, but the existing "charter" on water withdrawal, signed in 1985, is non-binding. Since 2001, the governors and premiers have been working on a revised Charter Annex called "The Great Lakes Basin Water Resources Compact Agreement" – nicknamed Annex 2001. The Annex was developed

to update the Great Lakes regional water management system, but the final language is not expected to be released for public comment until July 2005. Public hearings on the agreement will be followed by debate in each state or provincial legislature, a process that could last two years or more.

Conservation and efficient use will secure our water supplies and protect our environment for everyone today and in the future. Water conservation in the Great Lakes region is something all of us –individuals, industries and municipalities – can take action on now, helping to protect this remarkable resource.

Support a water management agreement. The Great Lakes are a treasure and so they should be cautiously protected. A strong, fully enforceable management agreement between the federal and regional governments of the United States and Canada should be signed as soon as possible. When we conserve water for all, we protect our individual right to clean drinking water..

Support long-term water research. Safe drinking water is becoming more difficult to obtain for millions of people around the world and even our Great Lakes have health-related water issues from time to time. The environmental integrity of the Great Lakes depends on maintaining the natural balance of water inflows and outflows. If we expect to protect the Lakes' water resources from increasing calls for its exportation, then we must develop a better understanding of the impact of water consumption within the basin and the relationship between all of the water resources in the system.

Encourage water conservation. Although strong legislation is an important step in protecting our regional waters, everyone in the Great Lakes basin should be conscientious of water usage. Water conservation at home is easier than you think and will it will even save you money.

For more information on the Great Lakes, tips and more, visit www.greatlakesforever.org. Great Lakes Forever is a public education initiative launching in Chicago this June by the Biodiversity Project, Shedd Aquarium and their partners. It's designed to raise awareness of the ecological value of the Great Lakes and concern about the threats to the ecosystem's health.

Biodiversity Project advocates for biodiversity by designing and implementing innovative communication strategies that build and motivate a broad constituency to protect biodiversity. A national organization based in Madison, Wisconsin, the Biodiversity Project has worked with leaders in policy, advocacy, education, science, religious and grantmaking fields since 1995. For more information, visit www.biodiversityproject.org and www.greatlakesforever.org.