

Lake Water: The Great Debate

Many of us take water for granted. We turn on a faucet -- and the supply appears to be endless. But it is not. Water issues may become as important as oil, gas and electricity.

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Reporter: [Ron Magers](#)

Ron Magers, one of the most respected broadcast journalists in the country, joined [ABC 7 News](#) as co-anchor of the 5:00 p.m. newscast in March, 1998. In addition to his responsibilities as co-anchor, Magers contributes his expertise in other areas of news and programming coverage, including elections and local specials on community issues.

The Great Lakes hold 20-percent of the world's surface fresh water but many Chicago-area towns could be running out of the precious resource.

Many fast growing communities are expected to face water shortages within the next 20 years. In fact, on Wednesday, May 16, 2001, a public hearing was being held in west suburban Wheaton to talk about the issue. But this is just part of the debate. Great Lakes water is a hot commodity and the fight over who can have it is growing.

Gasoline prices top \$2 a gallon. Home heating bills skyrocket. The State of California deals with brownouts from a lack of energy. These are the headlines of the new millennium. But an even more serious crisis could come our way this century-- Water.

"A lot of people think water will be the dominant issue of the 21st century," said Dan Injerd, IL Dept. of Natural Resources.

"In the coming century water issues are going to be as important as oil, as important as gold issues," said Cameron Davis, Lake Michigan Federation executive director.

"In the future wars will be fought over water ... not oil," said Tim Eder, National Wildlife Federation.

"Those of us with plenty of water are going to be under significant political pressure to share it," said George Kuper, Council of Great Lakes Industries.

Chicago has plenty of water, or so it seems. We sit on the shores of Lake Michigan, which connects to the Great Lakes. The amount of water here is staggering.

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The Great Lakes contain 20-percent of all the surface fresh water in the world and provide drinking water to approximately 25 million people.

Most of the water users on the Great Lakes recycle their water. Water is taken from the lakes; wastewater is treated and then returned to the lakes. There is one very large exception. There is one great lakes community that takes water from the lake and never returns it. Chicago.

To understand why -- we need to go back to 1885. At that time the Chicago River flowed into Lake Michigan carrying the sewage of a rapidly growing city. Water intake pipes out in Lake Michigan were picking up bacteria and putting it right back into the cities drinking water supply. 90,000 people died of cholera-- 10 percent of the city population. Drastic measures were necessary.

The Army Corps of Engineers began a massive project reversing the flow of the river. By 1900 it was done. The Chicago River now flowed out of Lake Michigan. We had reversed what nature intended. The Chicago area, once a drainage basin into lake Michigan, is now a drainage basin into the Mississippi River and on to the Gulf of Mexico. Great Lakes water is being removed, never to be returned.

It continues so this day, and on a huge scale. These water intake cribs located about two miles off shore pick up Lake Michigan water and pipe it to the water treatment plants in the city.

A total of about a billion gallons a day are sent through twenty foot pipes to the south purification plant near Rainbow Beach and the Jardine Treatment Plant located just to the north of Navy Pier.

The Jardine plant is the largest such facility in the world. Here the water is chemically treated, filtered and purified and then sent to homes and businesses. A billion gallons a day of treated water and another billion gallons a day of water coming out of the lake to keep the river and canal systems flowing. Two billion gallons a day from lake Michigan, down the river to the Gulf of Mexico. It is as if you tipped the Great Lakes on end and Chicago is the hole in the bottom.

Our Great Lakes neighbors once objected to Chicago's diversion of all this water. The fight went to the U.S. Supreme Court where the diversion was upheld. So how is Chicago viewed by those other Great Lakes states?

"It's not that we don't love Chicago, it's a wonderful city, but we do wish that level of diversion wasn't

taking place," said George Kuper.

Ironically, most water experts do not view the Chicago diversion as an ecological problem. It is simply a fact of life that the great lakes will likely survive.

"The Canadians divert more water INTO Lake Superior than we divert OUT OF Lake Michigan. So, right now the Great Lakes have more water coming into it than it did before man started modifying the system," said Dan Injerd.

But it is a political problem. After all, if Chicago can simply take two billion gallons a day, then why can't someone else do the same thing? The real fear is that certain people will soon be at our doorstep asking that very question.

"We have to be sure that water isn't just sold to the highest bidder," said Cam Davis.

"It's clear the Canadians are quite convinced that our intent on the south side of the border is to pipe water into Arizona swimming pools," said George Kuper.

"The U.S. constitution and international trade laws make it difficult to apply one set of standards here within the region and then attempt a totally different set of standards and say, no, you can't take our water, to somebody down in Texas or the Middle East or Asia," said Tim Eder.

The real fear, according to Eder, is that someone is going to come to us and say, 'you're letting Chicago take out two billion gallons a day and we just want one billion. So give it to us.'

So will the day come when a small town not far from the lake needs water, and asks for it and is told no? For the town of Lowell, Indiana, the future is now. It asked for water and was told no. Just 25 miles from Lake Michigan, Lowell is now a town that cannot grow by even one more house because they don't have water.

Part II

Lowell, Indiana, is a picture post card for small town America. But in the late 1980's Lowell discovered a problem with its well water-- too much fluoride. While some fluoride is believed to help prevent cavities, too much fluoride can actually damage tooth enamel.

Indiana University studied 235 students at Lowell Middle School and found 34 percent of them with mildly mottled enamel and 12 percent of them with moderately mottled enamel.

Lowell, Indiana, became the first town ever to be sued by the Environmental Protection Agency under the safe drinking water act.

"Our first approach was to try to obtain Lake Michigan drinking water," said Bob Hatch, president of the town council.

Lowell is about 25 miles south of Lake Michigan. More importantly, Lowell is about six miles south of the Lake Michigan drainage basin. For them to take water from Lake Michigan would require the unanimous approval of eight midwestern states and two Canadian provinces. Those are the rules under the Great Lakes charter. Michigan Governor John Engler said no.

"Shocked. It just seemed to be an arbitrary decision on his part. We were in a situation where this community had a health issue," said Hatch.

But facing court action from the EPA and the no vote from Michigan, Lowell went south of town and began to build new wells and a new water processing plant. Instead of a \$2 million pipeline to Lake Michigan water, the little town spent \$5 million on new wells.

When the town of Lowell first installed the wells and pumping stations it was thought they were on a 50 year supply of water. It turned out not to be the case.

"We've gone through several years of drought. The replenishment of the aquifer has depleted quite a bit so we are currently working at our max capacity for demands for Lowell right now," said Hatch. Because of water, Lowell literally cannot grow by one more house.

With all that water just 25 miles away, was it fair for the state of Michigan to say no to Lowell? Is it fair to say Lowell cannot grow by even one more house? Those questions bother water experts who see legal and political pressure building over the question of whose water is it and who has the right to it. Reg Gilbert looks at the Great Lakes region as a whole.

"In 2002, we will lose nine seats in the House of Representatives and seven of them are going to states that have water shortages," said Gilbert.

"When a condition occurs where if a major portion of an area was flat out running out of water, certainly that can generate enormous political pressure," said Dan Injerd.

"Some studies have come out recently showing that by the year 2025, the world will have outstripped its supply of water," said Cameron Davis, Lake Michigan

Federation. "We're sitting here in Chicago on the doorstep to about 20 percent of the world's fresh water supply. Add those two up and it's not unlikely that the Great Lakes will be tapped increasingly for that global water demand.

The governors and Canadian officials now overseeing Great Lakes water recognize that reality. This year they are proposing new rules that could help small towns like Lowell, but would also establish stronger guidelines that could stand up to future political and legal pressures.

Some environmentalists have some problems with the proposed rules. Industry has some problems with the proposed rules. But everyone agrees something needs to be done before the rest of the country comes asking for what we have come to think of as our water.



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