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Are we doing enough to protect Great Lakes?

By Jennifer M. Granholm / Special to The Detroit News

With the first two Earth Days of the new millennium now behind us, there is no better time to think about our state's most symbolic natural resource, the Great Lakes, and whether we're doing all we can to protect them. This is especially true in light of Annex 2001, a new plan recently offered by the Great Lakes Council of Governors that could allow the diversion of millions of gallons of water from our lakes every day.

As both Michigan's attorney general and as a commissioner on the eight-state Great Lakes Commission, I voiced my concerns about the Annex in a February letter to Gov. Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania, the chairman of the Great Lakes Council of Governors. I'm pleased to see that Gov. John Engler has now joined me in standing up for Michigan's people and their resources by sending his own recent letter of concern to Gov. Ridge.

In the past, proposals to drain the Great Lakes for profit were generally isolated, large-scale projects and thus easily identifiable. I am concerned, however, about newer schemes to divert water from the Great Lakes. These plans are perhaps more subtle but have the potential to cause just as much damage as massive shipments or exports. Among my primary concerns is a provision in Annex 2001 that would allow individual water diversions of up to one million gallons of water per day.

The United States Congress gave its blessing to a regional management approach in the Water Resources Development Act of 1986, which requires the consent of the governor of each of the Great Lakes states before water can be diverted out of the basin. The Great Lakes Charter of 1985 included the premiers of Canadian Great Lakes provinces so proposed withdrawals from either side of the border are now discussed among regional leaders.

This system has proved effective in preventing ill-advised diversions in the nearly 20 years since its inception, but the growing need for water and the emergence of international trade agreements that discourage and restrict barriers to exports have made the job of protecting the Great Lakes more difficult.

The Council of Great Lakes Governors is proposing Annex 2001 ostensibly in an attempt to strengthen the protections afforded by the Great Lakes Charter. Though I believe strongly in the concept of bolstering the protections afforded to our Great Lakes, I have strong reservations about the overall impact that the annex will have on this precious natural resource.

Specifically, a provision in the current annex draft would authorize diversions of up to one million gallons of water per day for municipalities

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around the country. Nothing in the current language would limit the cumulative impact of these exemptions, however, leaving the door open for diversions of millions of gallons of water each day.

We lack adequate data to fully assess the impact of diversions on the entire lake system. If only one city from every state took advantage of this pre-approved diversion every day, more than 18 billion gallons of water could be siphoned from our lakes each year. How would that diversion affect the fish population or the shore line or the shipping industry in our already-low Great Lakes? Instead of looking for diversions to approve, we should first look for ways to reduce withdrawals from the Great Lakes Basin.

Given the ever-increasing demand for fresh water and the growing number of proposals to put the Great Lakes up for sale, it is critical that we continue to act with one voice to preserve the quality of these natural treasures at our borders.

Jennifer Granholm is the attorney general of Michigan and a Democratic candidate for governor. Write letters to 615 W. Lafayette, Detroit, Mich. 48226, or fax them to (313) 222-6417 or send e-mail to letters@detnews.com.

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