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## Bush stirs politics of water

Column by *The Post's Michael Collins*

WASHINGTON -- President Bush touched off a furor recently when he seemed to suggest that he's open to the idea of piping water from the Great Lakes to other parched regions of the country.

But did he really?

The president's remarks, made during a White House interview with foreign journalists on the eve of his departure for the Group of Eight Summit in Italy, were in response to a question about the need for a continental energy pact and whether a water pact with Canada was the next logical step.

"Our nation must develop a comprehensive water strategy . . .," Bush said. "I've looked forward to discussing this with the (Canadian) prime

minister, should he want to bring it up, at any time, because water is valuable for a lot of our countries."

Exactly what he meant is open to interpretation and, consequently, the subject of debate.

U.S. Sen. Mike DeWine, a Springfield Republican who opposes diverting water from the Great Lakes, said he doesn't read anything into Bush's comments. "I think it was a specific comment about a specific situation," DeWine said.

Scott Milburn, a spokesman for U.S. Sen. George Voinovich, a Cleveland Republican who also opposes diversion, argued that some people are twisting Bush's statements. "People are making it look like Bush wants to ask Canada if we can pipe water to Arizona," Milburn said. "That is not an accurate reflection of what transpired."

Environmentalists, however, took a different spin.

Though he never mentioned the Great Lakes outright, there can be little doubt Bush was talking about those large bodies when he said he was willing to discuss a water pact with Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien, said Bryan M. Clark, legislative advocate for the Ohio Public Interest Research Group.

"That is the only freshwater source that I know of that is in Canada that the United States has attempted to tap for water for other parts of the United States," Clark said.

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The idea of pumping water from the Great Lakes to dry-but-growing regions like the southwest sounds like a foolish, absurd notion, said Glen Brand, the Sierra Club's representative in Cincinnati.

"Of course, this is the same administration that has proposed drilling in the Great Lakes, off the coast of Florida, in the Arctic wildlife refuge; repealing clean air health standards for dirty power plants; and propping up dying nuclear power energy," Brand said. "It wouldn't be any more absurd than any of these other proposals."

Opponents argue that diverting water from the Great Lakes would not only set a bad precedent, it would be bad policy. The Great Lakes contain about 20 percent of the world's fresh surface water and are the source of drinking water for Cleveland, Toledo and other cities along the shores, as well as a major source of recreation.

But water levels at the lakes have dropped considerably the past few years, approaching record lows.

At the same time, three decades of restoration and protection measures have started to transform Lake Erie from the cesspool it once was, but the work isn't done. "Now is not the time to impact that fragile freshwater ecosystem," Clark said.

Even if Bush chose to pursue a diversion policy, he'd need the permission of the Great Lakes governors. Under the Water Resources Development Act of 1986, the governors of Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota must all agree before any water is diverted outside of the Great Lakes watershed.

Another obstacle would be cost. Constructing a pipeline would be so expensive that most experts think it would be cost-prohibitive.

Then, there's the problem of politics. Chretien reportedly has dismissed the notion of permitting Canadian water to flow south. And, as the furor over Bush's remarks has shown, a diversion policy would have to overcome enormous opposition in the United States.

"It would be political suicide for someone to propose that," Milburn said.

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