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[NewsExpress](#) > [National](#) > Full Story



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- [Weather](#)
- [Horoscopes](#)
- [Lotteries](#)

### • [Features](#)

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### • [National](#)

[Back To Summary](#)

### • [World](#)

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### • [Business](#)

New Torstar executive Prichard expected to report profit drop this week

### • [Wired News](#)

Code Red: Is This the Apocalypse?

### • [Sports](#)

SCORECARD

### • [Lifestyle](#)

Epic video-game war brewing: Nintendo versus Sony, with Microsoft jumping in

### • [On This Day](#)

### • [News WebGuide](#)

### • [Your Comments](#)

[American Pie 2 - August 10th](#)

## Sympatico NewsExpress: National | Full Story

Monday, July 30th 2001

### Controversy grows over proposed Great Lakes oil and gas drilling

**DENNIS BUECKERT**

OTTAWA (CP) - Opponents of an American proposal to drill for oil and gas on the U.S. side of the Great Lakes are stepping up their campaign, warning of a potential environmental catastrophe.

But they're not getting any help from the Ontario government, which has allowed drilling under Lake Erie for almost a century. Critics of Michigan Gov. John Engler's plan say a drilling accident could devastate shorelines, ruin the fishery and pollute drinking water for millions of people on both sides of the border.

"This is becoming a top-tier political issue," said Keith Schneider of the Michigan Land Use Institute, an environmental advocacy group.

"The recreational value of maintaining our coastline in something like its current state of cleanliness is seen as higher economic value than drilling for oil."

The Michigan proposal calls for "directional" or "horizontal" drilling in which wells are drilled at a slant from shore.

Advocates say there's little risk of oil leaks because the oil pocket is hundreds of metres beneath the lake bottom, trapped by a layer of impermeable rock.

**Do you think Stockwell Day should have resigned?**

yes

Critics don't buy that.

The International Association of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Mayors has passed a unanimous motion calling for a moratorium on such activity.

Drilling would "put at risk portions of the world's largest fresh water supply," said mayors of 10 cities, including Chicago and the Canadian communities of Sarnia, Sault Ste. Marie, St. Catharines, Thunder Bay and Windsor.

"The potential for disaster is immense," Sarnia Mayor Mike Bradley said in a recent letter asking Ontario Environment Minister Elizabeth Witmer to oppose the Michigan proposal.

"One drilling accident and there would be a devastating impact on drinking water quality, fishing and tourism activities in the entire Great Lakes area."

Bart Stupak, a Democratic congressman from Michigan, has introduced a bill that would allow the U.S. federal government to step in to prohibit drilling.

Stupak also solicited support for a moratorium from the Ontario government without success.

"Ontario does not support the banning of environmentally sound directional or horizontal drilling under the bed of the Great Lakes," Natural Resources Minister John Snobelen said in a letter of reply.

Ontario is the only jurisdiction that permits oil and gas development in the Great Lakes.

Talisman Energy operates more than 500 offshore natural gas wells in Lake Erie, connected by lake-bed pipelines to the shore. Gas drilling in the lake began in 1913, and new wells are drilled each year.

John Jackson, past-president of Great Lakes United, said he did not know of the petroleum activity in Lake Erie until recently, when the topic came up amid the controversy over Michigan's proposal.

Jackson said he is astonished that drilling in such a sensitive area has received so little attention.

no

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Canada has strongly opposed U.S. drilling in Alaska's Arctic Wildlife Refuge but remains officially unworried about exploration in the Great Lakes.

"Should we have concerns about the effect of oil and gas drilling on the quality of water in the Great Lakes, we would of course take them up with the U.S.," said Foreign Affairs spokesman Reynald Doiron.

"At this time, the state of Michigan's proposal to drill onshore does not appear to raise such concerns."

Doiron said Ontario has not reported any environmental damage from the activity in Lake Erie.

Schneider, of the Michigan Land Use Institute, said the U.S. controversy over Great Lakes drilling is part of a nationwide public reaction to the perceived anti-environmental agenda of the Bush administration.

"The Democratic members of both the state legislature and Congress have seized on the issue as a way to define the Republicans' growth-at-any-price environmental program and to distinguish what they say is their better approach."

Schneider, a former environment reporter for the New York Times, said the most objectionable feature of the offshore drilling may be the damage it does to the shoreline.

"The coast down here is gorgeous - big sand dunes, forested shores, wide open beaches, just a magnificent freshwater ecosystem."

Each wellhead requires maintenance, road access, and involves the risk of leaks.

Schneider said no one is sure how much oil and gas there is under the Great Lakes, but the quantities are thought to be relatively small.

He said the reserves contain high concentrations of hydrogen sulphide, a toxic gas already a problem in Michigan due to existing petroleum activities.

Last month, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 265-157 to prohibit the federal regulator from permitting slant drilling under the Great Lakes. But

that measure still faces many legislative hurdles.

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