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- News
- Greater Toronto
- Business
- Waymoresports
- Entertainment
- Life
- We

News

- Ontario
- Canada
- World
- Opinion
- Editorials
- Letters
- Editorial Cartoon
- Headlines Only!
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- Careers
- Classifieds
- Newinhomes.com
- Specials
- Walkerton Tragedy
- Canada Day
- Fresh Air Fund
- Medical Secrets
- What's On This Summer
- 2008 Toronto Bid
- Golf 2001
- Features
- Crosswords
- Horoscopes
- Live Traffic Cams
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- Contests
- TV Listings
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Michigan plans lakeshore oil wells

Vernon Clement Jones
STAFF REPORTER

A Michigan plan to grant oil drilling leases on two Great Lakes is an ecological disaster in the making, environmentalists say.

The plan, expected to be approved by the Michigan department of natural resources this week, will allow as many as nine wells along the U.S. shore of Lake Huron and 20 along Lake Michigan.

The plan's impact would be felt in Canada because an oil spill could affect the entire Great Lakes system, environmentalists say.

The plan is the initiative of Michigan Governor John Engler and would break a 1997 ban on drilling leases signed by the Great Lakes states.

"Any oil spill along the lakeshore of any of the lakes would affect Canadians and Americans alike," said Hans Voss, of the Michigan Land Use Institute, which has spearheaded opposition to the plan. "If I were a Canadian I would be more than concerned."

In fact, the Ontario government began to issue drilling permits along Lake Erie six years ago, after a 16-year hiatus - albeit on a far smaller scale than that proposed by Michigan. Environmentalists say the drilling operations skirt a 1979 American-Canadian treaty which outlaws offshore drilling in the lakes.

The plan employs a newer technology called directional drilling. Engineers place oil derricks on land and bore diagonally down under the lake bed without passing through water. This reduces the hazards associated with traditional offshore operations, says a spokesperson for Engler.

"The mining is done . . . 1,300 feet from the shore," said Susan Shafer, the Republican governor's press secretary. "The oil pipes run almost



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4,000 feet below the lake bed, and there is no possibility of leaks." Still, environmentalists maintain oil spills remain a threat.

Voss pointed to the possibility of leaks at the base of the derricks and said the pipes will run as little as 1,000 feet beneath the lake bed.

“The flood waters of Lake Huron routinely reach one to two miles out on to land. The derricks could never be far enough away to protect the lakes.”

Voss said the large operations will take over the shoreline and compromise residents' quality of life.

These concerns were echoed in the U.S. House of Representatives, which voted June 30 to prohibit the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from issuing drilling permits for the Great Lakes.

But Michigan does not need congressional approval, said Shafer, and the federal law - supported by Republicans as well as Democrats - will have no effect on the drilling.

Federal approval was also not required when Ontario started issuing directional drilling permits in 1995.

Ontario's natural resources ministry says it has about 500 wells along Lake Erie, although their collective output is far less than that proposed for Michigan. Still, an average of 20 wells are added each year as old ones run dry.

NDP environment critic Marilyn Churley said the province should halt drilling, in light of Walkerton.

“The risk is simply too great for the small returns in oil,” she said.

The drilling has not caused any environmental problems, according to the federal environment department.

That doesn't assuage the concerns of John Jackson, past director of the watchdog group Great Lakes United.

“The fact that these oil wells haven't caused an environmental disaster in six years isn't proof of their safety. It simply means that we've been lucky - but for how much longer?”

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