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Don't Let Congress Control Great Lakes

By The Detroit News

The U.S. House, with way too much help from Michigan's delegation, last week approved a measure that has the potential of stripping control from the state of our most precious resource -- Great Lakes water.

The House passed an amendment to an energy and water spending bill that would bar the Army Corps of Engineers from allotting funds to issue new permits for oil or gas drilling under the Great Lakes. The matter now moves to the Senate.

Congress took the action even though the governors and premiers of the states and Canadian provinces bordering the Great Lakes are working together to develop reasonable guidelines for managing the lakes, including studying whether to allow oil and gas exploration.

Only Michigan Republican Reps. Mike Rogers of Brighton, Joe Knollenberg of Farmington Hills and Nick Smith of Battle Creek opposed the amendment. Rep. Rogers notes correctly that the issue isn't as much about whether drilling should be permitted as it is about who will decide Great Lakes policy.

Regardless of the drilling issue, the legislation opens the door to congressional control of the Great Lakes, an authority that now rests with the governors of shore-line states.

Rep. Rogers says he opposed the bill because of how it may affect future decisions involving the Great Lakes, particularly the diversion of water to the the thirsty West and Southwest.

With those Western states gaining population and clout in Congress, Michigan and other states in the region may find themselves helpless in blocking water diversion. The governors recently signed an agreement requiring consent of all the Great Lakes states and provinces before water could be diverted.

The authority for managing the lakes should rest with the residents of the states they border. That's why Gov. John Engler opposed the congressional action. Michigan's House delegation should have done the same.

But ironically, it was Rep. David Bonior, D-Mt. Clemens, who offered the amendment. Rep. Bonior is running for governor of Michigan, and if he's successful, he may find that he's sold his birthright with this measure.

The amendment, attached to a larger spending bill, now goes to the Senate, where hopefully the Great Lakes governors can prevail on their senators to kill it.

The Issue

Should Congress be allowed to control the Great Lakes?

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Congress had no business intervening, particularly when it knew the governors were already addressing the issue.

Representatives from the Council of Great Lakes Governor's Conference, including Gov. Engler, announced in mid-June a plan to protect diversions of water from the lakes.

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