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Canada vehemently rejects idea of water exports

Casual remark by President Bush sparks flurry of editorial comment across the country

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By Tom Henry, Block News Alliance

All it took was one remark from President Bush about fresh-water imports for the Canadian press to accuse him of firing the first shot in a U.S.-Canada diplomatic war.

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Bush struck a powerful political nerve Tuesday when he suggested that he was open to importing one of Canada's most valuable resources. Canadians clearly fear that the United States is on the verge of muscling in on their vast water supplies to accommodate its own parched southwestern states.

"George W. Bush is at the door, and he wants Canada's water" read the kicker to an editorial headline in Thursday's edition of The (Toronto) Globe and Mail, one of Canada's largest national newspapers.

It said Bush "wants Canada to export its fresh water in bulk to help the dry southwestern states water their impossible lawns." The editorial went on to say, "His musing on Tuesday sent a chill up many a Canadian spine, as such talk has done for the past decade."

Politicians and environmental activists on both sides of the border are still trying to figure out exactly what Bush intended when he responded to a Canadian journalist's inquiry at the White House, while fielding questions from selected foreign correspondents on the eve of the Group of Eight leaders summit in Italy.

An interview transcript, which the White House published Wednesday on the Internet, reveals no Bush statement as clear-cut as the Canadian press has suggested. The closest he appears to have come to expressing a definitive desire for importing Canadian water is when he said: "And I've looked forward to discussing this with the prime minister, should he want to bring it up at any time, because water is valuable for a lot of our countries."

White House environmental policy makers were surprised by Bush's comments. Because he is already at the G-8 summit in Genoa, they were reluctant to speculate about what he and Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien might say to each other if water becomes a topic. Because of the flap, the two are thought likely to discuss it at least briefly.

A Canadian wire service report, used by newspapers as far west as British Columbia's Vancouver Sun, said it was "believed to be the first time the issue has been raised publicly at the highest level." The report quoted Chretien as saying Canada's water is not for sale, and that he would deliver that message to Bush.

In the White House transcript, Bush acknowledged that his home state of Texas was so dry that, when the price of oil dropped to \$10 a barrel a few years ago, "water was more valuable than oil."

But, in response to the Canadian journalist's inquiry about U.S. water needs, the transcript shows that he said only this about piping water from Canada to the United States: "I don't know exactly what you have in mind in terms of importation of water. I presume it's -- perhaps -- some have suggested abandoned pipelines that used to carry energy. That's a possibility. I would be open to any discussions."

Sens. Debbie Stabenow and Carl Levin, both D-Mich., issued a joint statement expressing their "grave concern" to Bush "over his recent comments regarding a possible North American water pact with Canada and Mexico, in which Canadian water could be piped to the southwestern and western states."

Rep. Bart Stupak, also D-Mich, whose Upper Peninsula district encompasses more Great Lakes shoreline than any other, said in a statement: "Any plan to ship Canadian water to the American southwest could undermine efforts by both nations to protect vital resources like the Great Lakes from economic and environmental exploitation. I have repeatedly been assured that bulk movement of water has never been part of any international trade agreement. Now is not the time to open this Pandora's box."

Stupak and Rep. Marcy Kaptur, D-Ohio, have long been fervent foes of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Some have asserted that water could be subject to NAFTA laws if viewed as a tradeable commodity. Kaptur spokesman Frank Szollosi said the "issue of water diversion is a key argument in the debate about amending NAFTA and upcoming trade agreements" and added that Kaptur "vigorously fights trade agreements that don't protect human rights and the environment."

William Annett, chief executive of a bottler, Western Canada Water, from 1985 to 1992, said in a Globe and Mail column Thursday that few issues inflame Canadians as much as the possibility of exporting water to the United States.

"One of Canada's most enduring myths surrounds bulk water exports," he wrote. "Canadians fear that U.S. demand will force large-scale water exports, with detrimental environmental and political repercussions. [The] revelation that Prime Minister Jean Chretien will discuss the topic with President George W. Bush this weekend at the G8 summit in Genoa will undoubtedly re-ignite the controversy."

Jack B. Lindsey, chairman and chief executive officer of Sun Belt Inc., a Santa Barbara, Calif., company suing British Columbia for backing out of a water-export deal made in the early 1990s, said in a letter he has sent to the Globe and Mail's editor that Bush "has received my congratulations for elevating the water discussions to the Head of State level. We must find the proper and acceptable way for Canada to assist in meeting the needs of millions of people."

Lindsey's suit, which he has asserted could involve loss claims as high as \$10.5 billion, could be the first heard by a three-judge NAFTA tribunal.

Under the 1986 Federal Water Resources Development Act, all governors must sign off on any new diversions greater than 5 million gallons a day. "There are pretty strong protections already to head off those [potential lake] diversions," said Scott Milburn, spokesman for Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio.

Tom Henry is a reporter for The Blade of Toledo, Ohio, and the Block News Alliance.

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