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## Posthumus unveils his 'Marshall Plan for Water'

By George Weeks / The Detroit News



Throughout Michigan, there are parks, waterfront open spaces and other public enhancements financed by oil and gas royalties distributed through the Natural Resources Trust Fund.

Now comes a candidate for governor -- a Republican -- who argues the day is coming when water "very possibly" should be subject to royalties when pumped from Michigan for large-scale commercial consumption, especially for export out of local basins.

The subject came up during an interview with Lt. Gov. Dick Posthumus in which he touted his idea of a "Marshall Plan for Water."

It's only vague concept at this point. But he's right to put a high priority on water resources at a time when they are being targeted by what the Michigan Land Use Institute calls a "liquid gold rush."

Posthumus said of the current stewardship: "We've done a pretty good job, but we've tended to do it on sort of an ad hoc basis, sort of a regulatory basis. But we're now at the point where we need to develop a long-term strategy approach to the protection of all of the waters -- the Great Lakes, the underground waters and the inland waters -- so that we can better handle individual issues when they come up, like the Perrier issue, like slant drilling, for example. That's why I'm calling for a Marshall Plan, which is the long-term protection and development of our water resources."

The reference to Perrier was to the permit the state gave to the Perrier Group of America Aug. 15 to pump 105 million gallons of water per year from wells in Mecosta County for bottling as drinking water.

Posthumus broke with Gov. John Engler in opposing slant drilling from under the Great Lakes from on-shore rigs. Will he now join opponents of the Perrier project? He has not yet fully studied it, although he says "it appears that it is comparable with a what a small city would take out of the ground."

The real issue, apart from impact on local groundwater, is diversion of water out of the local basin and the Great Lakes basin.

Democratic candidates for governor have weighed in. U.S. Rep. David Bonior says the project "sets a dangerous precedent." He calls on the Army Corps of Engineers to study its impact.

Atty. Gen. Jennifer Granholm says failure to investigate the diversion issue "could trigger a massive water grab as users seek to remove Great Lakes water before such removals can be scrutinized."

I asked Posthumus if he thought the day will come when there will be some kind of royalty on drawing water for projects such as Perrier's. He replied:

"I think that is very likely -- I won't say likely -- very possible. A hundred years ago, nobody would have ever thought that oil would have value that it has today. But I believe

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that 50 years, 100 years from now, I don't know when it will be, that water will have that same kind of value because water will be used to run our automobiles -- it will be used for all kinds of things, and so there is that possibility."

Asked specifically if he would consider royalties on water, he said:

"Certainly, because I think we have to look at the whole issue from the broad range. I'm not saying we would do it, or recommend it, but I think all options ought to be open here as we look at a Marshall Plan for water. Our water resources are among the most important things we have in our state."

As Posthumus drafts his Marshall Plan for Water, he would do well to study recommendations of the Benzonia-based Michigan Land Use Institute on what Michigan should do in the face of emerging global water markets.

The institute says, "Without adequate water supply protections and clear rules for withdrawals and exports, Michigan leaves itself open not only to water marketing schemes from across the globe but also to shortages and environmental damage at home."

The institute has long been a critic of the Engler-Posthumus administration on the environment. But it should be pleased that Posthumus recognizes the need for going beyond ad hoc regulatory actions and developing a long-range strategy that more clearly defines the state's water policies.

As the state sheds its Rust Belt image, it must also defend its water resources from assault from the Parch Belt.

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