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Water war

National battle looms over Great Lakes resource

By **JOAN LOWY**
Scripps Howard News Service



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marvel of nature so vast that it is easily identifiable from outer space. Together, the Great Lakes contain one-fifth of all the drinkable water on the surface of the planet -- an estimated 6 quadrillion gallons.

With all that water on their doorstep, you wouldn't think Americans and Canadians who live in the Great Lakes basin would miss a few billion gallons. Guess again.

Protecting Great Lakes water from business and multinational corporations that would load supertankers with water and ship it to parched regions of the world at a profit has become a cause celebre on both sides of the border.

In the mid-1980s, thirsty municipalities in Arizona and California explored the possibility of acquiring vast quantities of water from the lakes through a system of pipelines and canals, but the project proved uneconomical. In 1998, The Nova Group of Ontario proposed bottling and shipping 156 million gallons a year from Lake Superior to water-short regions of Asia. The proposal didn't get much attention in the United States, but it prompted a massive outcry in Canada, killing the deal.

There are other water deals that wouldn't directly involve the Great Lakes, but could set a precedent were they to succeed. Global Water Corp., a Canadian company, has had a permit from Sitka, Alaska, since 1993 to ship up to 5 billion gallons a year of glacier water by tanker to China and the Middle East. The transportation costs have proved prohibitive so far and no shipments have taken place.

Another company, Sun Belt Water Inc. of Santa Barbara, Calif., wants to ship water from British Columbia to Southern California in supertankers capable of holding up to 75 million gallons each. Sun Belt has filed a

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multibillion-dollar lawsuit against British Columbia, arguing that the province violated the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by backing out of the deal after it had issued a permit.

With freshwater shortages becoming commonplace in large portions of the world, the future of the lakes has become a sensitive diplomatic issue between the United States and Canada. Canadians clearly fear that the United States will muscle in on their vast water supplies. But telling U.S. and Canadian entrepreneurs not to sell Great Lakes water is akin to telling the Saudis not to sell oil.

"There is a demand outside the region for significant quantities of water," said Reg Gilbert of Great Lakes United, an umbrella group of 170 environmental, labor and other interest groups in the region. "Lest anyone think the fact that it's not feasible now means it won't happen, all you have to do is to look back in history at all the 'unfeasible' water projects that have been constructed all over the West."

Some experts believe that free trade agreements could make it difficult for the region to block water exports. In June, the governors of eight states bordering the Great Lakes as well as the premiers of the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec signed an agreement pledging to work together to limit water withdrawals from the region.

A month later, President Bush, in response to a question from a Canadian reporter, appeared to vaguely suggest that the United States might want to tap Great Lakes water to help arid southwestern states. "Water will forever be an issue in the U.S., particularly the western part," Bush noted, adding: "I look forward to discussing this with (Canadian) Prime Minister Jean Chretien."

That was enough to set off alarms in Ottawa, prompting Canadian Environment Minister David Anderson to snap that any Bush-Chretien discussion on water will be "brief." The prime minister, Anderson said, "will tell the president that we have a policy of not exporting water, and that, I guess, will be it."

"George W. Bush is at the door, and he wants Canada's water" was the headline in Toronto's Globe and Mail, one of Canada's largest national newspapers.

"Everybody now has become very cautious about even talking about doing that because the governors of the Great Lakes and the people of the Great Lakes states have become very sensitive about diversion of water from the lakes," said Thomas Baldini, the U.S. chairman of the International Joint Commission, which advises the United States and Canada on shared water resources.

"I think the Canadians are concerned for good reason," said global water expert Sandra Postel. "The way NAFTA is written, if you open Canadian water resources for bulk water sales then you are basically opening Pandora's box. Virtually any company in the United States could decide to go into Canada and tap their water resources for export and for profit."