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Thursday, January 24, 2002

[Return to Metro](#)

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[E-mail this story](#)[Comment on this story](#)[Previous story](#) [Next story](#)

SITE INDEX

[Homepage](#)
[Search](#)
[CyberSurveys](#)
[News Talk](#)
[Autos Talk](#)
[Sports Talk](#)
[Lions Talk](#)
[Pistons Talk](#)
[Wings Talk](#)
[Tiger Talk](#)
[Tech Talk](#)
[Horoscope](#)
[Hot Sites](#)
[Lottery](#)
[Recommendations](#)
[Weather](#)
[Staff](#)

NEWS

[Autos](#)
[Insider](#)
[Auto Show](#)
[Consumer](#)
[Joyrides](#)
[Business](#)
[Careers](#)
[Census](#)
[Columnists](#)
[Commuting](#)
[Detroit History](#)
[Editorials](#)
[Health](#)
[Metro / State](#)
[Livingston](#)
[Macomb](#)
[Oakland](#)
[Wayne](#)
[On Detroit](#)
[Nation / World](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Death Notices](#)
[Politics / Govt.](#)
[Real Estate](#)
[Religion](#)
[Schools](#)
[Special Reports](#)
[Technology](#)

SPORTS

[Sports Home](#)
[Lions/NFL](#)
[Red Wings/NHL](#)
[Pistons/NBA](#)
[Shock/WNBA](#)
[Tigers/Baseball](#)
[MSU](#)
[U-M](#)
[More Colleges](#)
[Golf Guide](#)
[High Schools](#)
[Motor Sports](#)
[Outdoors](#)
[More Sports](#)
[Scoreboards](#)

Great Lakes pose hot issues

Lawmakers struggle over compensation for low water levels

By Gary Heinlein and April Taylor / *Detroit News Lansing Bureau*

DETROIT -- Protecting the Great Lakes is a hot political topic again.

After a decade in which other issues topped the agenda, Michigan's lawmakers and members of Congress are concerned about the lowest water levels in 35 years, bids to export Great Lakes water and environmental threats.

There has been little effort, however, to compensate individuals or businesses for damages associated with low water levels. No federal program offers relief to property owners affected by low lake levels.

In 2000, with lake levels dropping, the Legislature passed a bill making it possible for affected marinas to obtain as much as \$75,000 in low-interest state loans for dredging around their docks. So far, eight marinas have received loans totaling \$369,000.

"It's been modestly used, but it's still there to help small businesses," said Rep. Scott Shackleton, R-Sault Ste. Marie, who sponsored the legislation.

In Congress, Rep. Vernon Ehlers, R-Grand Rapids, last year introduced a bill to allocate \$50 million a year in federal money for cleaning up rivers that feed the Great Lakes. The measure is in committee. Protecting the lakes from diversion is a concern, he said.

"Michigan is losing political clout to the Sun Belt, especially the West, so it would be a dangerous precedent to say the federal government has control over that water," said Ehlers.

U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Lansing, said it's time to toughen protections against withdrawals from the Great Lakes.

"Back in the 1980s, the Congress passed a water resources act that authorized the Great Lakes states to come together to protect from diversion," Stabenow said. "The federal government gave the authority to the states so that if any one state objects to a diversion initiative, then it can't be done. We ought to reinforce and strengthen that."

Environmentalists were pleasantly surprised last week when Republican leaders in the Michigan Senate unveiled an aggressive 66-point plan for protecting the Great Lakes. The leadership pledged to make the plan a priority for this year and beyond.

The plan calls for such measures as a law that for the first time would restrict withdrawal of water from Michigan aquifers. Farms and factories proposing large-scale use of groundwater would have to prove there would be no harm to the water supply for wells, rivers and lakes.

Rep. Kenneth Sikkema, R-Grandville, who headed a bipartisan committee that drew up the plan, said the Great Lakes protection proposals represent the most extensive environmental plan to be advanced by any state legislature.

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▶ [Casino Guide](#)
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▶ [TV Listings](#)
[Crossword](#)

HOMESTYLE

Homestyle home
▶ [Decorating](#)
▶ [Food](#)
▶ [Gardening](#)
▶ [Home Improvement](#)
▶ [Home Life](#)
▶ [Home Tech](#)
▶ [Wine Report](#)

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[Lions](#)
[Autos](#)
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