

Conference sees hope in Great Lakes compact

Conservationists discuss future water use

By CALEY MEALS Freeman Staff

WAUKESHA – Water use in Wisconsin has tripled over the last 50 years and shows no sign of stopping if serious conservation efforts are not made, state conservation officials said at a conference Saturday.

But thanks in part to a recently signed agreement between the eight states surrounding the Great Lakes, proper conservation, protection and use of Great Lakes waters may be a much more distinct possibility.

"It's just common sense that we cannot continue to use any resource – especially water – as if the supply is infinite," said Steve Schmuki, president of the Waukesha County Environmental Action League. "Conservation is something that everyone can do something about."

WEAL hosted Saturday's "Water-Wise in Waukesha County" conference on conservation locally, regionally and nationally.

The conference, held at Carroll College, featured speakers from a variety of state environmental groups.

Water specialist for the nonprofit group Clean Water Wisconsin, Will Hoyer, spoke about the recently signed Great Lakes Water Resources Compact, a "revolutionary" agreement among the eight states surrounding the Great Lakes Basin.

"We need careful planning and cooperative stewardship to make water conservation work in Wisconsin," Hoyer said. "The lack of limits and the failure to establish water management principles has been a threat to our resources."

Hoyer and others attending Saturday's conference hope the Great Lakes Water Resources Compact, signed Dec. 13 by Gov. Jim Doyle and the governors of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York, will help protect and limit the removal of Great Lakes water.

The agreement should be helpful for communities like Waukesha that may need to use Great Lakes waters, said Todd Ambs, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Water Division administrator.

"The language of the compact gives them the opportunity to make their case," Ambs said of the possibility Waukesha will try to purchase water from Lake Michigan sometime in the near future.

The prospect of buying Lake Michigan water has been a key issue for Waukesha ever since the city was issued a federal mandate to reduce radium in its water supply. The city has been seeking different sources of water ever since.

"It would have been much more difficult before without any guidelines," Ambs said of Waukesha's possible request for Lake Michigan water. "Now, with the guidelines laid out by the Great Lakes Compact, they will have a much more robust application."

All eight governors would have to sign off on an agreement to allow Waukesha to purchase Lake Michigan water before it could become a possibility, Ambs said.

However, with the structure the compact provides, Waukesha may have a better chance now than before.

"The bar is still very high but more understandable now," he said.

"If the community can come forward with a comprehensive plan for use of Lake Michigan water, there's a way to make their case."

Caleb Vandenberg/Freeman Staff

Will Hoyer, a water specialist at Clean Wisconsin, describes the Great Lakes Basin Water Resources Compact during the Water-Wise conference at Carroll College on Saturday.