



# DNR to advance Waukesha water diversion bid to Great Lakes governors

By [Don Behm](#) of the Journal Sentinel  
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The [City of Waukesha](#) has the next six months to make its case for a Lake Michigan water supply in front of the Conference of Great Lakes Governors, where it needs the unanimous consent of the group.

After 51/2 years of scrutiny and revisions, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources announced Tuesday it would [forward Waukesha's request](#) for lake water to the other seven states for review.

The DNR took that step after finding the application meets requirements of a [Great Lakes protection compact](#) and could be approved.

Even so, the vote of one Great Lakes state against the plan would block the city from building a proposed \$207 million network of pipes and pumps to divert lake water to Waukesha and return the flow as treated wastewater to the lake.

The multistate examination begins Jan. 7 with a webinar briefing sponsored by the Chicago-based [Conference of Great Lakes Governors](#). The group plans to hold public meetings, including one in Waukesha, and complete its review in six months.

Waukesha's request will be forwarded to the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec for comment during the multistate review, and provincial representatives will participate in conference meetings, but only the governors of the eight U.S. states will vote on the application.

"The families of Waukesha need a sustainable and healthy water supply," Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly said in response to the DNR's announcement.

Reilly described the city's application as a "request to borrow Great Lakes water" that would not draw down lake levels.

Waukesha is the first municipality in the United States located entirely outside the Great Lakes basin to request a diversion of water under terms of the 2008 protection compact.

Although the compact prohibits diversions of water outside the basin, there is one exception that fits Waukesha: A municipality outside the basin can ask for Great Lakes water only if it is located in a county straddling the basin divide.

The compact drew a line through all U.S. counties straddling the lakes' drainage basins and said water from the lakes could not be pumped beyond those counties. Waukesha County straddles the subcontinental divide between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River basins.

In June, the DNR announced [its preliminary decision](#) that Waukesha's request to tap into Lake Michigan met compact requirements. At that time, the DNR determined that Waukesha's use of water supplies west of the subcontinental divide would have adverse effects on wetlands, streams and inland lakes.

Waukesha studied a dozen other water sources to build a case for lake water. Among the rejected options were additional shallow wells outside the city and wells on the banks of the Fox River, as well as inland lakes in Waukesha County and abandoned quarries.

In other DNR findings: Lake Michigan is the only reasonable water supply available to the city and that Waukesha could not meet its future water supply needs by decreasing demand through conservation efforts.

Water conservation measures will reduce daily demand for water by 1 million gallons a day by 2050, Waukesha Water Utility officials said.

The DNR collected [public comments](#) on its preliminary findings and held hearings this summer on the city's plan to divert up to an average of 10.1 million gallons of lake water a day by midcentury.

In 2014, the city pumped an average 6.6 million gallons of water a day from wells.

"We received approximately 3,600 comments," said Eric Ebersberger, the DNR's deputy administrator for environmental management. The large number of comments confirms the intense public interest in Waukesha's request, he said.

The DNR will include the comments and its responses in final technical review documents and environmental impact studies that will be forwarded to the other states.

[Oak Creek](#) would supply lake water to Waukesha under the proposal.

Nearly all of the water to be purchased from Oak Creek would be returned to the lake as treated wastewater, to comply with terms of the compact. The city would discharge the water to the Root River, a lake tributary, in Franklin.

Waukesha is requesting a Lake Michigan water supply to replace its 10 wells, including seven deep wells drawing radium-contaminated water from a depleted sandstone aquifer. Those deep wells provided 83% of the water distributed throughout the city last year.

The city is under a court-ordered deadline of June 2018 to provide radium-safe water.

Even if its lake water request is unanimously approved by June of next year, there would not be sufficient time for construction prior to the deadline and Waukesha would need to return to court to ask for an extension.

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