

Great Lakes governors make the right decision on Waukesha



Great Lakes officials meet in Chicago in April to examine the City of Waukesha's request for Lake Michigan water. Credit: Don Behm

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When it came time to vote, delegates of the Great Lakes governors saw the same thing that the City of Waukesha and the state Department of Natural Resources saw: Waukesha has no other reasonable alternative for its water supply but to draw and return water to Lake Michigan. So the delegates on Tuesday [unanimously approved Waukesha's request](#) for Lake Michigan water under the [Great Lakes Compact](#).

It's a decision that best serves not only the city but the environment as well. Under orders from federal and state agencies to find a new water source, Waukesha could no longer rely on the radium-laced aquifer that has served it for so long. Alternatives proposed by critics of the city's request could have had negative impacts on the lakes, rivers, streams and underground aquifer of Waukesha County. Conservation measures initiated by the city were helpful but not sufficient to meet the city's need.

"None of the evaluated alternatives were found to be reliable sources for a long-term, dependable and sustainable public water supply," representatives of the governors (known as the Regional Body) said in a declaration of finding last month.

Furthermore, as Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly noted in a guest commentary on this page on Monday, the city's current wells already pull water from Lake Michigan without returning it because "our groundwater supply is actually interconnected with the Lake Michigan watershed...The Regional Body concluded that

approving our application to use and return surface water 'will result in a net increase of water in the Lake Michigan watershed.'"

The governors imposed some conditions on Waukesha's request, limiting the city's service area and the amount of water to be withdrawn on a daily basis and imposing some additional enforcement requirements. Those are conditions the city can live with. The important thing is that the governors made the right decision for Waukesha and the lakes.

This approval also shows that the compact works. Designed to bar communities outside the Great Lakes Basin from withdrawing water from the lakes, the compact contains an exception for communities in counties straddling the lakes' drainage basins — such as Waukesha — but only after meeting rigorous requirements, which Waukesha spent a good deal of time, study and money to meet.

On Tuesday, the Governors' Compact Council agreed that the city had done so.

There's a possibility there will be a legal challenge to the decision. But the reviews by the DNR and other states have been so thorough that it's hard to see what could be challenged. And it should be noted that the critics of the request did help make this a better application.

After 13 years, it's time for Waukesha to move forward and obtain the healthy water supply its citizens deserve.