

Waukesha water diversion - the right decision was made: James Zehringer (Opinion)



A boat cruises on Lake Michigan as morning fog covers the downtown Chicago skyline June 10. The unanimous vote by Great Lakes governors to allow Waukesha to divert Lake Michigan water to the Wisconsin community's water supply was the right call, following a decade of negotiations and rigorous conditions, writes James Zehringer of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. (*Kiichiro Sato, Associated Press*)

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Governors of the eight Great Lakes states made the right decision when they joined in a unanimous, bipartisan vote to allow the small Wisconsin city of Waukesha to withdraw - and return - water from Lake Michigan.

As director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and an active participant in negotiations leading up to that vote, I firmly support the governors' decision, which allows a community long plagued with radium-contaminated drinking water to take uncontaminated water from Lake Michigan and return the same amount of cleaner water back to the lake.

The process for Waukesha to find a clean drinking water solution has been long and exhaustive. For more than 10 years, state and local officials in Wisconsin explored many water-supply alternatives, as required

by the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact. The Waukesha request has seen many alterations, with a number of concessions made by the community over that time to reach an agreement acceptable to all eight Great Lakes states.

I commend the original parties who initially drafted the terms and conditions of the Compact, and who had the foresight to allow small towns and cities like Waukesha to share in this great natural resource if they met strict criteria. As I chaired these proceedings, it became readily evident to me that they had worked with incredible diligence and foresight to ensure that the waters of our Great Lakes would be protected from unwise diversions and environmental challenges, while preserving the availability of water for use by nearby communities, and that the states and provinces would work closely together in making sound decisions.

There were many changes that were made to the original application to make sure it followed the guidelines of the Great Lakes Compact that allowed diversions for straddling counties and communities like Waukesha.

In fact, conditions imposed on Waukesha in [the final approval](#) are even stricter than the original withdrawal application guidelines, including new restrictions on existing wells, limiting the amount of new wells allowed to be drilled, as well as requiring detailed monitoring of return flow and enhanced mandates for performance audits.

Previously, a million gallons of water a day were being diverted from the Lake Michigan watershed through an underground drinking source and discharged to the Mississippi River basin. Under this agreement, that water will be both withdrawn from and returned solely to Lake Michigan.

These conditions will not open floodgates and dry up our great natural resources. Rather than encourage additional requests for withdrawal, these limitations set the bar even higher for any future diversion applications.

I must emphasize again: The Waukesha decision was a unanimous, nonpartisan and carefully considered decision by all the Great Lakes governors. It was truly a historic vote and sets a higher bar for any future consideration on water withdrawal applications.

My hat is off to all the farsighted public officials from the United States and Canada, natural resource professionals, legal specialists and stakeholders who worked so long to forge this agreement.

It was the correct decision for the continued well-being and abundance of Great Lakes water - the world's largest supply of fresh water and an irreplaceable ecological, economic and recreational resource for Ohio and its Great Lakes neighbors.

I am extremely proud of the decision we reached as well as the exhaustive process we undertook to help ensure we arrived at the best choice for the Great Lakes and the families of Waukesha. The unheralded reality in all of this is that the Compact accomplished exactly what it was designed to do. Because of that, citizens in a small community will have access to safe clean drinking water, and our precious Lake Erie remains protected.

James Zehringer is director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and chair of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Council.