

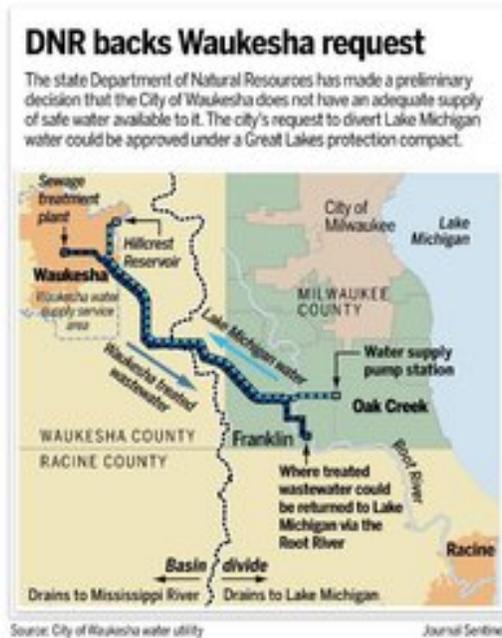
Preliminary DNR blessing moves Waukesha Great Lakes water bid forward



Don Behm

Waukesha has proposed returning water to Lake Michigan by discharging treated wastewater to the Root River at S. 60th St. in Franklin. Waukesha is seeking lake water as its new municipal source.

By [Don Behm](#) of the Journal Sentinel
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The City of Waukesha cleared a significant hurdle in its push for a new water supply Wednesday when state environmental officials [announced a preliminary decision](#) that the city's request to tap into Lake Michigan could be approved under a Great Lakes protection compact.

Waukesha does not have a reasonable water supply option available to it on the west side of the subcontinental divide, a primary criteria for complying with the compact, the Department of Natural Resources said in preliminary findings released Wednesday after a [five-year review](#) of the city's request.

Waukesha also cannot meet its water supply needs through more stringent [conservation of its existing sources](#), another criteria required for approval under the compact, the DNR said in its draft review documents.

After a decade of studies, Waukesha targeted Lake Michigan in 2010 as its only sustainable water supply option.

The DNR will make a final decision on [the city's request](#) in December after officials review public comments and hear testimony received this summer, said Eric Ebersberger, the department's water use section chief.

If the department doesn't change its mind in response to comments, Waukesha's request would be forwarded at that time to the other seven Great Lakes states for approval.

Unanimous approval of the eight states is required for the project to proceed, and the [Council of Great Lakes Governors](#) said it could usher the proposal through the multistate review in six months.

The DNR is setting aside the next 60 days for public comment — double the 30-day requirement under state environmental impact review laws — due to the public interest in the city's precedent-setting application, according to Ebersberger.

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 in a county straddling the basin divide.

Waukesha County straddles the subcontinental divide between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River basins.

Waukesha is seeking permission to divert up to an average [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 10 deep and shallow wells.

The cost of a lake water supply is \$207 million. Oak Creek would supply lake water to Waukesha under the plan.

If the city's request is approved by the eight states, Waukesha would stop using deep wells drawing radium-contaminated water from a depleted sandstone aquifer, officials said. The city relied on its seven deep wells to provide 83% of its water last year.

The DNR on Wednesday released both a [draft environmental impact analysis](#) of the city's proposed water diversion plan and a draft technical review summarizing why the department at this time believes the request meets requirements to protect the Great Lakes.

The department is inviting public comment on both sets of documents through the end of August, Ebersberger said.

Public hearings will be held in Waukesha, Milwaukee and Racine during August so southeastern Wisconsin residents can learn more about the city's plans and submit comments at the same time.

Some critics of the city's diversion request have said there is ample water in the deep aquifer to meet Waukesha's needs if it installs radium treatment on all deep wells.

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

Apart from the public health issue, a series of studies by the United States Geological Survey concluded the deep sandstone aquifer beneath southeastern Wisconsin and northeastern Illinois has dropped so low that continued withdrawals are unsustainable.

Regional environmental groups have suggested Waukesha could switch from deep wells to a dozen or more shallow wells tapping groundwater close to the surface.

But studies indicate use of so many shallow wells could draw water away from surface streams and wetlands and damage those resources and the fish and other aquatic life that depend on them. Nearby private well owners likely would challenge new municipal wells in court, according to consultants for the city.

The compact cautions the eight states not to authorize an exception to the law's prohibition of diversions unless a project will not endanger the integrity of the Great Lakes' ecosystem.

Toward that end, the compact requires a community diverting water from one of the lakes to return to the source an equivalent volume less an allowance for consumptive uses, such as bottling of beverages and evaporation during watering of lawns.

Waukesha initially proposed discharging its treated wastewater to Underwood Creek, a tributary of the Menomonee River that would carry the flow back to Lake Michigan.

After the state's analysis showed the small stream could not accommodate the flow, Waukesha switched discharge locations to the Root River, a lake tributary, Ebersberger said.

The city has an option to purchase 60 acres on the east bank of the river, southeast of the intersection of Oakwood Road and S. 60th St. in Franklin.

Public meetings

The state Department of Natural Resources is inviting public comments until Aug. 28 on its [documents reviewing Waukesha's request](#) for Lake Michigan water. A series of three public hearings will be held during the comment period:

■**Waukesha:** 5:30 p.m. Aug. 17 in the auditorium at Carroll University Center for Graduate Studies, 2140 Davidson Road.

■**Milwaukee:** 1 p.m., Aug. 18, Zilber School of Public Health, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1240 N. 10th St.

■**Racine:** 5:30 p.m. Aug. 18, Racine Masonic Center, 1012 Main St.

About Don Behm



Don Behm reports on Milwaukee County government, Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, the environment and communities in southeastern Wisconsin. He has won reporting awards for investigations of Great Lakes water pollution, Milwaukee's cryptosporidiosis outbreak, and the deaths of three sewer construction workers in a Menomonee Valley methane explosion. [@conserve dbehm@journalsentinel.com](mailto:dbehm@journalsentinel.com) 414-224-2293