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# Waukesha has earned the right to draw water from the lake



In its application for a Lake Michigan water supply, the City of Waukesha has proposed returning water to the lake by discharging treated wastewater to the Root River. Credit: Don Behm

Yesterday 1:32 p.m.

Last week, representatives of Great Lakes states and provinces recommended [approval of the City of Waukesha's request](#) to draw water from Lake Michigan to replace the city's current supply from deep wells. Next month, the [Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers](#) will make a final determination of that request.

We hope it follows the recommendation of the representatives who voted last week and approves Waukesha's years-long quest

for a sustainable and healthy supply of water. The approval would make the city the first U.S. community outside the Great Lakes drainage basin to receive a diversion of lake water since the compact became federal law in 2008 — and would demonstrate that the compact process works.

The representatives added some significant conditions to Waukesha's application — including shrinking the city's potential service area — but in the end, on a 9-0 vote with Minnesota abstaining, found that drawing water from Lake Michigan was the most reasonable solution.

State officials had determined the same: In December, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources concluded a five-year review of the city's request with a finding that the continued pumping of water from the deep sandstone aquifer was not sustainable since it is 350 feet below predevelopment levels. The naturally occurring radium in the deep aquifer poses potentially serious health issues for city residents.

There are still critics who favor a non-diversion solution. But they should read closely the [Declaration of Finding](#) by the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Water Resources Regional Body. Among its conclusions:

■ "All of the Applicant's water supply alternatives within the Mississippi River Basin are likely to have, and cannot be sustained without, greater adverse environmental impacts than the proposed diversion. In addition, none of the evaluated alternatives were found to be reliable sources for a long-term, dependable and sustainable public water supply and, therefore, the Applicant is without a reasonable water supply alternative.

■"(A)pproximately 100% of the volume withdrawn from the Basin will be returned via flow through the Root River, a tributary of the Basin. This effectively results in no net loss of water volume to the Basin.

■"The changes in the characteristics of the flow within the Root River, while potentially creating some negative changes for certain aquatic and benthic organisms, is expected to provide an overall net benefit to the Root River and the Lake Michigan watershed.

■"Approving a diversion of Great Lakes water with return flow will result in a net increase of water in the Lake Michigan watershed."

The conclusion is simple: This diversion is the best alternative for the lake, the aquifer, the waterways in Waukesha County and the city of Waukesha.

Waukesha has worked long and hard to get this right; so did the DNR and so has the Great Lakes conference. Critics who say this opens the door to sucking the Great Lakes dry are blowing smoke. Approving the application means that the compact to protect the Great Lakes works. Communities in counties outside the basin are prohibited from applying. Even those inside such counties will need to go through an expensive and thorough review, just as Waukesha has done.

And this is as it should be: Only in very narrow circumstances and requirements and after stringent review can water be drawn from the lakes. Waukesha has passed the review and met those requirements. It deserves the diversion.

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