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Lake Michigan is Waukesha's only reasonable water supply option, DNR analysis shows

Draft EIS says Waukesha meets Great Lakes Compact requirements

Reducing the volume of needed water would still cause adverse environmental impacts

The only reasonable water supply alternative for Waukesha is a Lake Michigan water supply, according to the draft Environmental Impact Statement and draft Technical Review released today by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Following more than five years of analysis, the DNR draft concludes that the city's application for water meets the requirements of the Great Lakes Compact.

According to the DNR's draft Technical Review, Waukesha "has no reasonable water supply alternative . . . even considering conserving existing water supplies," and all alternatives to Lake Michigan water "are likely to have greater adverse environmental impacts due to projected impacts on wetlands and lakes".

The review found adverse impacts in ranges of 713 to 2,326 acres of wetlands for groundwater alternatives, in addition to adverse impacts on streams and lakes, even if withdrawals were limited to 8.5 million gallons per day, instead of the 10.1 million gallons per day that the DNR says is reasonable for when the service area is built out, in about 2050.

"The DNR analysis shows that alternatives to lake water all have adverse environmental impacts even if our need for water would be less than forecasted," according to Dan Duchniak, general manager of the

Waukesha Water Utility. “Adding additional water conservation to the 10% conservation we proposed, or changing the service area, would not make groundwater a reasonable alternative,” he said.

“We are pleased that the DNR’s five-year analysis confirms previous studies by the utility, regional planners and others,” said Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly. “This is a major milestone in Waukesha’s long effort to provide a sustainable and healthy long-term water supply for our residents and business.”

Links to the DNR documents will be found at the water utility website, www.waukesha-water.com, which also has Waukesha’s application, answers to frequently asked questions and other information. The DNR web site is at dnr.wi.gov/topic/wateruse/waukeshadiversionapp.html.

Current water supply is severely depleted

Waukesha’s primary water supply comes from the deep aquifer, which is severely depleted. The depletion is due to a layer of shale rock in the area that restricts recharge from rainfall and snowmelt, combined with high regional demand in the densely populated areas of southeastern Wisconsin and northeastern Illinois. Continued use of the aquifer is not sustainable for the long term, Duchniak said. In addition, the aquifer is contaminated with radium – a naturally-occurring, radioactive carcinogen – at levels that exceed federal drinking water standards.

A May 2015 draft report for the Canadian and U.S. governments on protection of the Great Lakes, by the International Joint Commission, also says that groundwater models suggest that “groundwater withdrawals in the Chicago-southeastern Wisconsin area . . . are unsustainable.”

Alternative water supplies using shallow groundwater – in addition to or instead of the deep aquifer – would have permanent adverse environmental impacts to wetland habitat and designated environmental areas with valued brooks and streams, Duchniak said.

Waukesha is a leader in water conservation, but conservation can’t eliminate the need for a new water supply. Waukesha was the first city in Wisconsin to adopt a daytime ban on sprinkling, the first to adopt conservation rates that increase with residential levels of water use, and the first to adopt a toilet rebate program in the state. It is also continuing its conservation efforts, including public education and outreach and conservation incentives for industrial users.

Great Lakes Compact limits diversions and requires return flow

The DNR will hold public hearings on its draft EIS this summer in Waukesha, Milwaukee and Racine. It will make revisions based on public comments before forwarding it to other governors for approval. It will then present its findings to the Governors of the Great Lakes states, who must unanimously approve the state’s proposal under the Great Lakes Compact. The premiers of Ontario and Quebec, along with Tribes and First Nations, will also be consulted under the Compact.

The Compact is an agreement among Great Lakes states and provinces that became federal law in 2008. It generally prohibits Great Lakes water from being piped outside of the Great Lakes Basin. An exception is provided for communities that are in counties that straddle the basin divide, like Waukesha.

More than 99% of the U.S. population that live in communities outside of the Great Lakes Basin are not eligible for Great Lakes water. Of the 1% of the U.S. population that lives in communities in straddling counties, the communities must show they have no reasonable water supply alternative to Great Lakes water. The DNR draft says Waukesha has demonstrated that need.

Also, under the Compact, a community like Waukesha is required to return the lake water to the Basin after use and treatment. Waukesha's proposal is to return approximately 100% of the previous year's volume withdrawn, having no impact on lake levels. The volume of water it would withdraw and return on a daily basis is approximately 1/1,000,000 of 1% of Great Lakes water.

Return flow will improve water quality and the fishery in the Root River

Waukesha would return water via the Root River, a tributary that flows to Lake Michigan. For years, the DNR and regional planners have explored options for supplementing flow in the Root River, which has had its base flow reduced by development in the watershed. However, the costs of augmenting the river's flow were too high.

"Waukesha's return flow water is an environmental resource that can benefit the Root River by increasing its base flow, but without a cost to the state. During the summer and fall, some sections of the river have very low flows. Adding water would improve the river and the fishery, especially during fall spawning runs of salmon and trout," Duchniak said. "However, during higher flow periods when the fish are not restricted by flows in the river, the return flow is a small fraction of the river flow."

The river is also home to the Root River Steelhead Facility, where eggs are collected from spawning salmon and trout for DNR fish hatcheries. Increased flow in the river would improve the DNR's ability to collect eggs because low flows prevent the fish from reaching the facility. "Improving the flow of the Root and collecting more eggs would create more fishing opportunities in the Root and also offshore in Lake Michigan. That would help provide recreational and economic benefits to thousands of anglers and to the businesses they patronize," Duchniak said.

"The quality of our return flow water can help the river meet water quality standards for parameters like phosphorus," he added. The return flow water, which would enter the river in Franklin, will be higher quality than the Root River and have stricter permit limits than existing wastewater discharges in the area that discharge to Lake Michigan tributary rivers or directly to Lake Michigan. Waukesha's wastewater facility uses advanced treatment technologies and is one of the few Wisconsin facilities with effluent filtration and ultraviolet light (UV) disinfection, which is better for the environment than traditional disinfection with chlorine. Waukesha does not have combined sewers and there is no threat of overflows or of untreated discharges to the Root, he said.

Waukesha's water supplier would be the Oak Creek Water and Sewer Utility. Waukesha had also negotiated with the City of Racine, but the further distance to Racine made costs too high. Waukesha wanted to also negotiate with the City of Milwaukee, but Milwaukee refused to serve the entire service

area that Waukesha is required to serve under Wisconsin's new water supply planning law. Wisconsin law requires that water supply services areas be consistent with wastewater service areas, which have existed for the decades. The DNR said it could not approve an application under conditions proposed by Milwaukee.

Only 15% of the land in Waukesha's water supply service area is available for development, because 70% is already developed and 15% is designated as environmentally protected. Population is projected to increase a modest 0.5% per year until the area is built out in approximately 2050.

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