

Great Lakes water: Turn off the tap before it's too late

People often stare in disbelief when told that the Great Lakes could be drained to supply water needs around the world, while enriching a handful of multi-national corporations that could take water free of charge.

Part of the disbelief comes from our perceived water abundance. Most who live in Wisconsin give little thought to where our water comes from. We also presume it will be around for our children. After all, we are bordered by two Great Lakes and the mighty Mississippi River; we live above abundant groundwater aquifers; and we are surrounded by 15,000 inland lakes and

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84,000 miles of streams and rivers. Water appears to be everywhere.

Despite this abundance, parts of Wisconsin are facing water scarcity. For example, the Brown County Water Authority has negotiated a deal to pipe Great Lakes water from Lake Michigan to the Green Bay suburbs via a pipeline beginning far to the south in Manitowoc. Waukesha wants to tap into Lake Michigan with a pipeline

from Milwaukee, then use and dispose of it in the separate Mississippi River Basin. Madison has drawn down its underground aquifer so much that it has reversed the flow of groundwater; its lakes are now feeding the groundwater, rather than the other way around.

Beyond Wisconsin, global consumption of water is doubling every 20 years, more than twice the rate of human population growth.

Water scarcity is becoming an ever-increasing reality — the "oil" of the 21st century — throughout the world, and a handful of multi-national corporations are capitalizing on this scarcity by amassing

control of water resources in what is now a \$1 trillion dollar industry.

Bottled water is the most familiar bulk water export. The industry has grown tremendously in the past decade. From 1970 to 2000, the volume of water bottled and traded worldwide jumped from 300 million gallons per year to 22.3 billion gallons per year.

Wisconsin had its own brush with privatization on a large scale in 2000 when Nestle/Perrier attempted to bottle Wisconsin's spring waters — first in Waushara County and then in Adams County. In an incredible display of community concern that combined local organizing,

town-hall meetings, media outreach, state legislation and litigation, Wisconsin's residents sent Perrier packing. But this episode exposed the lack of legal protections that prevent a private company from taking and privatizing water.

With 20 percent of the world's fresh surface water held in the Great Lakes, Wisconsin and the other Great Lakes states and Canadian provinces control a valuable and vulnerable resource. Deciding how to manage this asset will affect our state and region's economic strength, public health and basic rights.

Concerns about whether we can protect and con-

serve water in its natural state or be forced to trade it under international trade agreements are growing along with market demand for privately supplied water.

That is why Great Lakes governors and Canadian premiers must ensure that the Great Lakes Annex Implementing Agreements now under review must protect the Great Lakes as a public trust and not as a tradable commodity.

We all should support the agreement's general prohibition against diversions of Great Lakes water. However, the bottled water industry wants an exemption that permits the unlimited exporting of Great

Lakes water in 5.7 gallon (20 liter) and smaller bottles.

This giveaway is bad public policy, could be precedent setting for other industries and must be removed from the proposed agreement.

You can call for a stronger Great Lakes agreement during a public comment period that closes on Aug. 29. Visit www.midwestadvocates.org to learn how to have your comment officially recorded.

Melissa K. Scanlan is executive director of Madison-based Midwest Environmental Advocates, a non-profit environmental law center working for clean air, clean water and a clean government.

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