

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 3, 2008

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President Bush Signs Great Lakes Compact Into Law

Environmentalists Celebrate Victory While Looking Ahead to Implementation and Restoration Efforts

Milwaukee—Members of the environmental and conservation community throughout Wisconsin and around the Great Lakes region are celebrating the federal enactment of the Great Lakes Compact, the agreement—ten years in the making—between the eight Great Lakes states and two Canadian provinces aimed to protect, conserve and sustain the waters of the Great Lakes region.

“This is no small feat,” explains Jodi Habush Sinykin, Of Counsel to Midwest Environmental Advocates, an active participant in the 2006-07 Wisconsin Legislative Council Study Committee on the Great Lakes Compact and with subsequent policy development. “Before reaching President Bush’s desk, the Great Lakes Compact first had to be signed into law by each of the Great Lakes states and then ratified by both the United States Senate and House of Representatives. To be sure, it has been a long, challenging process but one well worth the effort.”

In August, the U.S. Senate passed the Compact unanimously and, last week, the House of Representatives passed the Compact 390-25.

“The citizens of Wisconsin deserve tremendous credit for today’s historic passage of the Great Lakes Compact,” says Anne Sayers, Program Director for the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters, a key player in the state’s legislative victory. “Citizens pushed their legislators to pass not just a Compact, but a Strong Compact; not just at one hearing, but at every opportunity over the course of two years. Our legislators listened and voted to adopt it 128 to 2 in May, and our Wisconsin Congressional delegation unanimously followed suit.”

Designed to shield the Great Lakes from harmful water withdrawals, the Compact institutes critical protections for the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River ecosystem, including implementation of a water management plan and promotion of water conservation measures throughout the Basin.

“The Great Lakes are undeniably one of our state’s greatest natural assets,” says George Meyer, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, “This Compact will foster the ecological protections needed to sustain our essential water resources and valuable aquatic habitats for generations to come.”

Another active participant in Wisconsin’s Compact efforts and member of the Governor’s Working Group on the Compact, Peter McAvoy, Environmental Director at the Sixteenth Street Community Health Center, states, “Wisconsin can be very proud of what it has accomplished with our Compact legislation; our state has gone far beyond what the other seven states have done in terms of providing direction on how key provisions of the Compact should be implemented.”

“For Wisconsin the next important steps will be developing rules that make it clear on how we intend to advance meaningful water conservation practices and how we will address requests for diversions that meet the spirit and intent of the Compact,” adds attorney Habush Sinykin.

"Now that the water is here to stay, we must shift our attention to restoring the quality of water in the lakes," states Melissa Malott, water program director at Clean Wisconsin, one of the original Wisconsin environmental stakeholders in the Compact process. "Toxic runoff, invasive species and algae blooms in the Great Lakes all exact an enormous environmental and economic toll on our region."

A recent study found that the impact of invasive species alone costs the Great Lakes Region over \$200 million annually. Non-native mussels attach themselves to boats and clog industrial infrastructure, while algae blooms create foul smells that decrease tourism and diminish property values.

“With the Compact victory in hand, now is the perfect time for our state and region to focus on the logical next steps of cleaning up and restoring the ecological integrity of our irreplaceable Great Lakes,” concludes Emily Green, Director of the Sierra Club’s Great Lakes Program.

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