

## SPOTLIGHT ON THE GREAT LAKES COMPACT

By Carol Gibson and Kathy Woodbridge of LWV Cuyahoga Area with the assistance of Clara Maurus, LWVO Water Issues Lobbyist and Gloria Green, Lake Erie Basin Committee

It is high time the Ohio Assembly passes *The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact*. Without the Compact, Ohio's water supply is vulnerable to decisions made by other states, Congress, or Canada to divert or sell water. Once the Compact is approved in the same form by each of the eight Great Lakes' state legislatures and consented to by the U.S. Congress, the Great Lakes Compact will become legally binding.

It will then be Congress' task to take the necessary steps to make the agreement binding with the two Canadian Provinces that have already passed the Compact. (Only Congress can negotiate legal agreements with foreign entities.)

The Compact up for consideration by the eight states within the Great Lakes watershed provides for a regional oversight board with the power to forbid or allow the selling or diversion of water. The new board would provide for joint management, increased protection, and improved policy to meet the challenges of climate change, water shortages, drought conditions, and insufficient conservation policies.

Getting to this point has taken more than five years of deliberation among the Great Lake states and the two Canadian provinces.

The Compact overwhelmingly passed the House during the last session, but not the Senate. Please visit <http://takeaction.lwv.org/lwv/dbq/officials/> to contact your state Representative and Senator to urge them to show leadership and resolve in getting the Compact introduced, considered, and passed as soon as possible.

Passage of *The Great Lakes Compact* is critical. The Compact will protect the Great Lakes, which are essential to the economic viability of the region. Despite the fact that the Great Lakes region holds 20 percent of the world's fresh surface water, it is a finite resource; the lakes are only replenished by one percent a year. "A warming climate is likely to reduce Great Lakes water supply while increasing water demand within the region," says a National Wildlife Federation report, *Climate Change and Great Lakes Water Resources*.

The report goes on to say, "as other regions suffer from water shortages and increased demand for water resources, they may look to divert Great Lakes water to quench their thirst." Already thirsty areas of the Southeast and Southwest are looking toward the Great Lakes due to drought, sprawl and insufficient conservation policy. In addition, the eight states involved could lose 10 to 15 seats in Congress after the 2010 Census--seats that surely will be redistributed to those more populated and thirsty areas. This could make obtaining the consent of Congress for the Compact more difficult.

Water problems within the Great Lakes watershed go back at least a century when in the 1890s Chicago solved the water and sewer problems of a growing city by reversing the flow of the Chicago River. This strategy pulled in thousands of cubic feet of water per second from Lake Michigan, but never returned it. Today, Chicago and suburbs are still benefiting from this reversal. More recently, in 1997, officials belatedly discovered that a Canadian entrepreneur had successfully applied for a permit to ship water to Asia. While the scheme was quickly quashed, it starkly highlighted the need for a Compact. The current election season found New Mexico's Governor Richardson opining that the water-rich states surrounding the Great Lakes might be a source of help to the water-deprived Southwest. Due to an immediate angry reaction from Great Lakes' Governors, Mr. Richardson quickly rescinded his remarks.

So, why *shouldn't* we help other areas in need of water? Because the economic, agricultural, industrial and even recreation/tourism areas are all dependent on the Great Lakes. In Ohio alone, points out Larry Mitchell of the League of Ohio Sportsmen, "Lake Erie supports the largest sport fishery in the Great Lakes and one of the largest commercial freshwater fisheries in the world, underpinning a \$1 billion sport fishing industry."

LWVO has had a strong position on the Interbasin Transfer of Water since 1987, favoring the ban of water diversion to areas outside the Great Lakes Basin in addition to strengthening the development of other safeguards. (See pp. 25-26 *Agenda for Action*)

"*The Great Lakes Compact* is perfect for managing [the Lakes] during a time of change in the region and across the United States," stated attorney and geologist Bret Stuntz, co-author of the National Wildlife Federation Report. He sums up the report by declaring, "The threats are severe, the solution is clear."

It's time for Ohio to do its part: The Ohio Assembly must pass the Compact.

### *Late Breaking News*

The House passed legislation on February 19 that would ratify the multi-state *Great Lakes Compact* to prevent water diversions from the region, despite a rival proposal in the Senate. Ohio Senator Tim Grendell (R., Chesterland) who has raised concerns about property rights, introduced a bill that exempts tributary groundwater and nonnavigable surface water from regional control, while calling for a simple majority rather than unanimous approval from governors when deciding which communities will be allowed to tap into the water.

Both Ohio Senate President Bill Harris and Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Michael Huebsch recently called for changes that will complicate efforts to pass the *Great Lakes-St Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact* – or as environmental groups fear unravel the process.

Contact your state senator today! Ohio needs *The Great Lakes Compact*.