

NATURAL RESOURCES: Interbasin Transfer of Water

Positions: Interbasin Transfer of Water

(Adopted May 1987)

Interstate and interbasin transfers of water have been made in the past to serve municipalities, industries, energy development, and agriculture. However, approval of those transfers was based on less complete information about their effects on aquatic ecosystems than is now available. It is inevitable that requests for such transfers will be made in the future and will require carefully considered responses. However, construction costs of large-scale water transfers are high, and economic losses in the basin of origin may also be high.

Environmental costs of water transfers may include quantitative and qualitative changes in lake levels, wetlands, and related fisheries and wildlife, diminished aquifer recharge, and reduced stream flows.

Lowered water tables may affect ground water quality and cause land subsidence.

Therefore, any diversion plan:

Must include an understanding of the fragility and the incomplete knowledge of the ecological, economic, and social nature of the area of origin, the area through which the water must pass, and the receiving area; and

Must contain methods for reviewing and adapting the plan to protect the affected areas during all stages of development, operation, termination, and post-termination of the interbasin transfer.

As we look to the future, water transfer decisions will need to incorporate the high costs of moving water, the limited availability of unallocated water, and impacts on the affected ecosystems.

LWVO believes that the criteria for evaluating both the decision-making process and the suitability of a proposed interbasin transfer of water should include:

1. Ample and effective opportunities for informed public participation in the formulation and analysis of proposed projects;
2. Evaluation of all economic, social, and environmental impacts in the basin of origin, the receiving area, and any area through which the diversion must pass, so that decision makers and the public have adequate information on which to base their conclusions;
3. Examination of all short- and long-term economic costs including, but not limited to, construction, delivery, operation, maintenance, and market interest rate;
4. Examination of alternatives including, but not limited to, supply options, water conservation, water pricing, and reclamation;
5. Participation and review by all affected governments;
6. Accord with international treaties;
7. Procedures for resolution of intergovernmental conflicts;
8. Responsibility for funding to be borne primarily by the user with no federal subsidy, loan guarantees, or use of the borrowing authority of the federal government unless the proposal is determined by all levels of League to be in the national interest; and

9. An enforceable intergovernmental agreement with supervision separate from implementation and with assurances that any mitigation offered to alleviate any adverse impacts be financed.

As the waters of the Great Lakes basin are interconnected, the present and future condition of the Great Lakes' ecosystem should be a primary consideration when weighing the water needs of other areas. LWVO recommends that:

1. Water conservation should be a goal of all concerned governments in the Great Lakes Region,
2. All concerned governments in the Great Lakes Region should have water accounting systems and should adopt water use plans as a basis for prudent management of the Great Lakes;
3. The Great Lakes Compact bans diversions of Great Lakes water to points outside the Great Lakes basin, with limited exceptions, and requires the use of conservation programs within the basin. The Great Lakes basin is defined by the five lakes and land that drains into them. Eight states and two Canadian provinces have land in the basin.
4. Canadian interests must be considered in Great Lakes resource decision making. At a minimum, existing mechanisms for these international discussions, such as the International Joint Commission, and ad hoc technical task forces should be strengthened;
5. Because the Great Lakes are international, future investment and development in the region should include cooperative United States-Canadian management of the water resource; and
6. Since the Great Lakes' waters are currently used for multiple and competing purposes, any proposals for additional diversion decisions must take into account the potential impact on ecological, economic, aesthetic, navigational, energy generation, national security, and general welfare values.

Background: Interbasin Transfer of Water

Lake Michigan Inter-League Group (LMILG) asked LWVO to concur with its position on Interbasin Transfer of Water in April 1986. Since LWVO cannot concur without more than 50 percent of our Local Leagues concurring, a study packet was sent to our local Leagues. At least 79 percent of our Leagues participated and unanimously concurred with the LWVUS (from *Impact on Issues* 1986-88) and LMILG positions on Interbasin Transfer of Water. The group is currently called the Lake Michigan League of Women Voters and is focusing on The Great Lakes Compact.

Outlook: Interbasin Transfer of Water

This position is a natural extension of our water position developed in the 1960s and further recognizes water as essential for life and Ohio's economy. The League will continue to support and monitor the Great Lakes Charter and its companion Annex 2001 and the Great Lakes Compact to achieve the following objectives:

- Ban the diversion of water to areas outside the Great Lakes Basin with limited exceptions. See Great Lakes Compact discussed above.
- Establish new, consistent standards for the review of proposed uses of Great Lakes water.
- Strengthen technical data collection and sharing among the states and provinces to assist in decision-making.

- Require current and future water-users to practice improved conservation measures.
- Encourage lasting economic development while making sure withdrawals do not damage the Great Lakes.
- Commit to an ongoing process that allows for public involvement.

Implementation of the Compact is going slowly, in part due to tough economic times and new governors in 2010 for six of the eight states. Ohio is one of the states that have only met part of the reporting deadlines.