

Water Privatization: Who Owns Great Lakes Water?

"What lies ahead is a world where resources are not conserved, but hoarded, to raise prices and enhance corporate profits and where military conflicts could arise over water scarcity...It's a world where everything will be for sale." -Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke "Blue Gold"

Today we are facing a global water crisis as large masses of people lack access to safe drinking water. By 2025 two-thirds of the world's population will be experiencing water shortages.

As freshwater supplies shrink and existing sources are polluted, the growing population will demand more and more water in the coming decades. As a result, water will be the oil of the 21st century, determining the wealth of nations and deciding global conflicts.

Corporations are jumping at the opportunity to reap billions of dollars in profit to provide people with water by privatizing public water systems, taking our most precious resource out of the people's hands and putting it at the mercy of the global marketplace.

Formerly a holdout against privatization, the U.S. was the almost exclusive preserve of municipal ownership and distribution in the world. A few decades ago privatization started to become a trend, and now over 28,000 water systems are in corporation's hands. That amounts to 14% of the nation's water, and the number is steadily increasing each year.

Aging water systems that are very expensive to repair coupled with promises of millions of taxpayer dollars saved attracts decision-makers to privatization. They would rather hand over control than dip into the public's pockets, often without taking the risks into serious consideration. Privatization often ends up costing the public more through increased rates and government subsidies to water companies, often without the promised repairs to the water infrastructure.

Water-rich areas of the world are already under pressure to export their water to water-scarce regions. Water companies are expanding their holdings, and already are allowed to request exports of water, selling it to out-of-area third parties using public infrastructure.

People in the Great Lakes have major cause to be alarmed. We're living in and using the largest freshwater system in the world, making us a prime target for corporations who would like to reap the benefits of selling our water to thirsty regions like California and the American Southwest.

Bulk Water Export

A major threat to the Great Lakes

In the next century, water will be moved around the globe based on a country's ability to pay, much like oil is today. Billions of gallons of water will be exported each year.

Bulk water removal from the Great Lakes for diversion to water-scarce regions would have devastating effects on the ecosystem as well as the tourism, fishing, and shipping industries.

Several pipelines are built or being built in Europe to transport water, and it could be happening here next. George W. Bush, an advocate of moving water from Canada to California and the Southwest, has called for the construction of a massive energy pipeline. Many fear that he intends to use it for water transportation. Canadian water would be moved into the Great Lakes and transported throughout the U.S. by canals.

In 1998, the Ontario government approved a plan to ship millions of liters of Lake Superior water by tanker to Asia, but the approval was rescinded after massive public outcry. The situation prompted questions of cross-national boundaries and future management of Great Lakes water. As a result, Great Lakes Annex 2001 was drafted.

Great Lakes Annex 2001

A plan for the future of the Great Lakes

Formulated by 8 Great Lakes governors and 2 Canadian premiers. The Annex aims to keep local, not federal, control over the Great Lakes and to guarantee there will be no uncontested future water withdrawals in the Great Lakes basin.

Annex provisions require no major withdrawals/exports be allowed unless the same amount of water can be returned in better quality. Each state must adopt comprehensive water management plans. The Annex will govern withdrawals over 3 million gallons/day and let states decide on smaller amounts. It will grandfather in current withdrawals. It will regulate water exports, and also water withdrawals within the Basin.

The Annex is expected to be finalized sometime in 2004. It is meeting with mixed reactions from both inside and outside the Basin, and may come under scrutiny as a possible barrier to trade.

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Bottled Water

Costs 10,000 times more than tap water.

The bottled water industry is one of the fastest growing, bringing in \$22 billion annually and selling over 24 billion gallons of water. It now plays a key role in world water pricing. The advertising machine has consumers believing bottled water is "safer" and "healthier." Tests have proven that tap water is of as good, if not better, quality. Bottled water is a poorly regulated industry; sources of the water have included wells in industrial sites and parking lots.

The Great Lakes has battled the industry as Wisconsin has rejected the building of a water bottling plant and Michigan has been battling with Nestle over a bottling plant that has been pumping 500 gallons per minute out of Lake Michigan. That water eventually becomes the "Ice Mountain" brand of bottled water. A judge recently ordered the plant to close down but on appeal and with Michigan's governor's approval, that decision has been stayed. The bottling plant continues to pump water as the battle continues.

Get Active! What You Can Do

Keep a watch on City Hall: Municipal officials sometimes begin and complete the privatization process without public debate.

Keep local utilities in check: Make sure your local utility is keeping infrastructure maintained, so that they won't fall prey to the offers of water companies to update water systems.

Encourage alternatives: Educate decision-makers about the dangers of privatization, as well as offering other options, such as restructuring.

Watch for improper use of influence: Water companies may influence decisions by handing out money.

Oppose privatization language in Federal and State legislation: In 2002, federal legislators tried to pass laws that would force municipalities to consider privatization before qualifying for federal aid. Contact your legislators and tell them to oppose pro-privatization language.

Who is Privatized?

A sampling of communities in the Great Lakes who have already privatized

Ahmeek, MI
Ashtabula, OH
Aurora Park, IL
Aurora, OH
Bayside, WI
Beechcrest, OH
Boone County, IN
Bradley, IL
Calumet, MI
Chicago, IL
Copper City, MI
Crete, IL
Cumberland, IN

Fort Wayne, IN
Gary, IN
Hamilton, ON
Hubbell, MI
Huber Ridge, OH
Indianapolis, IN
Kankakee, IL
Laurium, MI
Madison, OH
Mansfield, OH
Manteno, IL
Marcellus, MI
Marion, OH

Meadville, PA
Mequon, WI
Milwaukee, WI
Mohican, OH
Monee, IL
Peel, ON
Plainfield, IL
Ridgefield, IL
Streator, IL
Tiffin, OH
University Park, IL
Warren, PA
Willowbrook, IL
Worthington, OH

For More Information

Go to the **Great Lakes Directory** (<http://www.greatlakesdirectory.org>) for extensive articles and information on privatization in the Great Lakes and around the world. Contact the **Environmental Association for Great Lakes Education (EAGLE)** to find out what you can do to fight privatization.

Books:

Blue Gold by Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke

Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit by Vandana Shiva

On the web:

Public Citizen's Water For All Campaign (<http://www.wateractivist.org>)

Sierra Club (<http://www.sierraclub.org/cac/water>)

Great Lakes United (<http://www.glu.org>)

Indigenous Environmental Network (<http://www.ienearth.org>)

IATP Water Observatory (<http://www.waterobservatory.org>)

Michigan Land Use Institute (<http://www.mlui.org>)

Ohio Environmental Council (<http://www.theoec.org>)

Polaris Institute (<http://www.polarisinstitute.org>)



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