

Protecting the Great Lakes: victory and vigilance

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Water shortages are becoming as common as kudzu and cowboy boots in the South and West. California is in a second year of serious drought. Global warming threatens to deplete rivers, lakes and streams in Georgia and elsewhere. And wily oil tycoon T. Boone Pickens is buying up water rights in the Texas Panhandle, on the reasonable assumption that H₂O is the new black -- or clear -- gold.

This drop of reality makes the water wealth Michigan shares with its Great Lakes neighbors very enticing. And all the more vulnerable. As the country's water shortage grows, so does the possibility that some enterprising businessman could run a pipeline from Lake Michigan to Las Vegas to feed the Bellagio Fountain.

Against that backdrop, there is reason to breathe a sigh of relief, and sing a song of celebration. Congress is well on its way to approving a multi-state agreement designed to protect the Great Lakes, the repository of 90 percent of the nation's fresh water, against large-scale theft. Called the Great Lakes Compact, the accord establishes a legal framework for Michigan and surrounding states to retain control of the sweetwater cerulean seas that feed our taps, power our industry and attract our tourist trade.

The deal has passed unanimously in the U.S. Senate. The House version, cosponsored by Rep. Vernon Ehlers, R-Grand Rapids, is still pending. Members of Congress, who reconvene in September, no doubt with the looming election much in mind, should not recess until this important measure is on its way to President Bush. Mr. Bush has said he will sign it. The compact is an urgent priority to the eight states that touch the Great Lakes. What's more, the pact is

in line with 41 other interstate water agreements that have been approved by Congress.

The compact would guard against large-scale withdrawals from outside the Great Lakes drainage basin, and require states to adopt plans to regulate their own water, including inland waterways. As the only state completely within the basin, Michigan has a large stake in making sure these safeguards are in place. The historic nature of the agreement, and the new protections it would provide, make the concerns raised by some members of Congress all the more puzzling. Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Menominee, has objected that the compact allows bottled water to leave the basin. Individual state laws can still regulate withdrawals for bottled water and other purposes, just as Michigan has done. That minor objection is no reason to oppose the major progress represented by the compact.

The approval of Congress and the president assures that the federal government

recognizes that the states hold the primary power to manage the Great Lakes -- for now. Of course, what Congress gives, Congress can take away. There's the rub. Population is shifting away from Michigan and toward those very parts of the country where water skirmishes are increasingly common.

Congressional representation is shifting there, too. Michigan's waters face a sea change of political power. This state's leaders, and all champions of the Great Lakes, will have to remain vigilant, even as they cheer this significant victory.