

## Thirsty states may covet Lakes' water

By 2020, water could be the hottest commodity

By Deb Price / Detroit News Washington Bureau

Prowling the streets of Albuquerque, N.M., water cop Carol Edwards spotted a serious offense -- water merrily flowing down a street gutter.

Intently aware that each passing second meant a needless loss of water, Edwards gunned her vehicle up the foothills, tracing the wet evidence back to a home sprinkler system and its forgetful -- and shame-faced -- owner.

"I clocked it at nine-and-one-half miles. Nine-and-one-half miles," Edwards recalled, her repetition underscoring her disgust.

"Water is very precious here. We just can't let water run into the street in the desert," said the inspector, who gave the homeowner a \$20 ticket and a stern lecture.

Water, as Albuquerque and much of the world is discovering, is rightly being called the 21st century's blue gold. And while seemingly farfetched today, concern is growing that increasingly thirsty parts of the United States and the world may, in coming decades, try to force the Great Lakes region to share its bounty.

Already in the United States, 36 states predict they will have water shortages in the next 10 years, even without drought or climate changes due to global warming, according to a congressional report.

Meanwhile, the World Bank has declared that by 2020, water will be the world's most sought-after commodity. By 2025, it projects that 4 billion people -- half of the world's population -- may live in "conditions of severe water stress," particularly in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.

Droughts are sometimes the culprits, causing panicked Denver in 2002, for example, to launch an ad campaign imploring residents to "Only Wash The Stinky Parts." Other causes include the exploding growth of metro areas such as in Atlanta, which has angered farmers because of its water hogging. California continues to face complaints about taking more than its share from the Colorado River.

The expected skyrocketing tension between the water haves and the have-nots explains why environmentalists and other Great Lakes advocates are concerned.

In Albuquerque, the water cops are part of the city's unusual effort to conserve water, begun in 1995 after officials learned that the aquifer under Albuquerque wasn't being fully replenished by the Rio Grande as always believed. The city now has three full-time water cops.

In a scarcity-frightened town where five criminal cases are pending against people accused of stealing fire-hydrant water, golf courses and parks no longer use pristine aquifer water but instead rely on treated water from the local sewage plant. And citizens are offered rebates of \$125 for installing low-flow toilets and \$25 for using a rain barrel to collect nature's rare gift -- barely 5 inches of rain last year (compared with a Detroit average of 31 inches). Conversely, if they're caught abusing water, they face fines of up to \$1,000.

Diverting water to areas outside the Great Lakes Basin would be a challenge because, unlike the Colorado River, which runs through several states that draw on its water, the basin essentially keeps the water inside like a bowl. But environmentalists and lawmakers say it is technically feasible.

The biggest diversion from the Lakes so far is the century-old Chicago River diversion. The river counts as a diversion because Chicago takes its drinking water from Lake Michigan, but flushes it down the Illinois Waterway after it goes through the city's sewage treatment plants. The city diverts its sewage for sanitary reasons.

Public sentiment in the Great Lakes region has largely been against diversions outside the basin. "In some ways, the Great Lakes history is unique in that we haven't seen huge water diversions," said attorney Noah Hall, a diversion expert at the National Wildlife Federation. "Almost every other part of the country survives on water diversions."

The current law on removal of Great Lakes water dates to 1986, when Congress banned diversions unless agreed to by the governors of all eight Great Lakes states. In 2000, Congress urged the states and Canadian provinces to come up with a standard for withdrawing and conserving water. The following year, the governors and Canadian officials reached an agreement to create standards.

The proposed rules are now gathering public comment. But, as the clock ticks, the region's ability to stop diversions might be evaporating.

Advocates fear the Great Lakes are highly vulnerable to the growing political clout of water-thirsty states and the possible use of the U.S. interstate commerce clause and international trade agreements to claim that refusal to sell water is a trade violation.

Already, Nestle Waters North America is arguing in a lawsuit that the 1986 federal law violates the interstate commerce clause. Nestle is suing Michigan after the state told the bottler it couldn't sell its Ice Mountain water outside the basin.

Environmentalists and others fear water could also be diverted in other ways.

Giant pipelines could be built to move Great Lakes water, just like pipelines are used to move natural gas in Alaska, says U.S. Rep. Vernon Ehlers, R-Grand Rapids.

Water could also be moved by adding it into an existing waterway, warns U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Menominee.

The Mississippi River, for example, starts in northern Minnesota, a Great Lakes state. Lake Superior and the Mississippi River don't currently meet, but a canal could be constructed to connect them. Then, communities along the Mississippi River could be served Great Lakes waters along the Mississippi's 2,300-mile route to the Gulf of Mexico.

"Can it technically be done? Absolutely," Stupak said. "Just jump it from river to river. Or take us to the (world trade court) and force it from us under international trade agreements. The world is envious of the freshwater we have. And that envy is only going to grow."

Stupak fears that a move by Sitka, Alaska, to sell up to 25 million gallons of water a day from its Blue Lake could be pointed to as setting a precedent for seeing water as a commodity. Sitka has signed contracts with three water exporters that send water to countries such as China, Saudi Arabia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Hall said the compact being worked out could protect the Great Lakes region. By including a prohibition on diversion within a comprehensive water policy based on conservation and environmental protection, the compact would give the Great Lakes states a much stronger defense against an international trade law challenge.

Under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, one of the exceptions to a restriction on trade is for conservation of an exhaustible resource.

"We don't know if water is a commodity yet under international law," said Hall. "But we want to make sure it is protected even if it becomes a commodity. We can prohibit diversion but it needs to be based on science and conservation, and not economic protectionism."

But while today's Congress might approve such an agreement, its future might be shaky as Western states gain more seats in Congress because of population gains. "The trends aren't good for the Great Lakes states because other parts of the country are running out of water but gaining political power," Hall said.

In the meantime, the Great Lakes will continue to be the source of envy elsewhere.

"I can't even imagine what it would be like to have all that water you have up in the Great Lakes," said Dixie McIntyre of San Angelo, Texas.

Water was the No. 1 factor driving how the retiree recently landscaped her new home's yard. She chose small areas of buffalo grass, which stays green with virtually no water, flowering yucca plants and gravel.

"If I don't finish all of my bottled water," McIntyre says, "I'll find a houseplant to pour it onto.

"When you've lived on the edge of the desert, you know what a precious commodity water is."

## Water wars

Anecdotal evidence suggests many cities and states already are worrying about their supplies of freshwater:

- Several Colorado River basin states, such as New Mexico and Arizona, are demanding that California, one of the biggest users of the river's water, stop hogging the resource and stick to a 1922 agreement limiting the state's water withdrawals.
- Atlanta, the fourth-fastest-growing metropolitan area from 1990 to 2000, is exploring ways to meet more demand for water because of population growth.
- Chicago, the seventh-fastest-growing area during the 1990s, has experienced significant groundwater depletion.
- Tampa, another area seeing population growth, began operating a desalination plant in 2003 to produce 25 million gallons of drinking water daily. The technology, also used in Texas and California, is rare in the United States because of the high cost of desalting ocean water.



Arthur Spragg / Associated Press

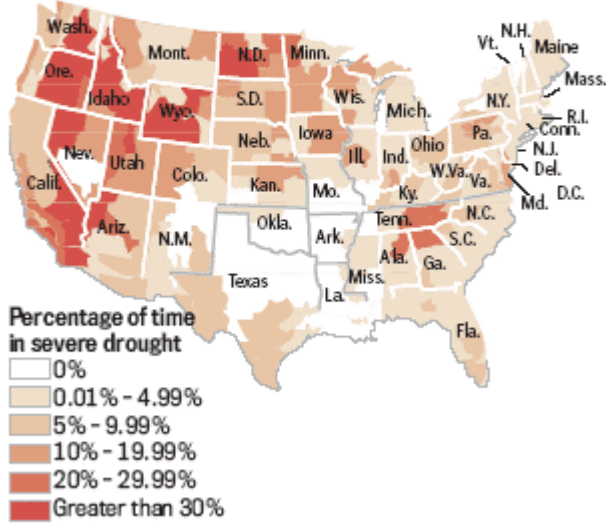
**Dixie McIntyre, of San Angelo, Texas, landscaped her new lawn with plants that could survive with little water.**

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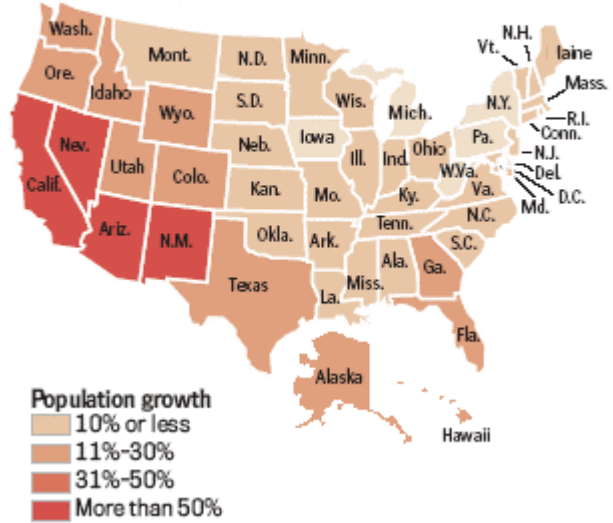
## Growing worries about the West

Environmentalists and others worry that population growth in states outside the Great Lakes Basin, notably in the West, and increasingly dry conditions around the country would create pressures to divert Great Lakes waters to feed those regions.

Palmer Drought Severity index



State population growth 1995 to 2005



Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the High Plains Regional Climate Center

Aaron Hightower / The Detroit News