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NEWS

How could Chicago sell Lake Michigan water to Joliet, 35 miles away? Five questions answered.



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Last month, Chicago struck a deal to sell Lake Michigan water to a city 35 miles southwest of the city. The price tag: \$1 billion.

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot signed a 100-year agreement that will transport treated Lake Michigan water to Joliet and five of its surrounding suburbs, starting in 2030.

The fact that Illinois has a different set of rules when it comes to the Great Lakes Compact, a landmark agreement that generally prohibits diversions out of the basin, is a sore spot for many.

And at a time when water is becoming scarcer, some experts believe Illinois should be focused more on sustainable water management.

Here's what to know about this historic water deal.

Why is Chicago selling Lake Michigan water?

Because it can.

The deal will likely entice industries and businesses into the area, which could mean big economic gains not just for the Joliet area but for Illinois.

Chicago began diverting water from Lake Michigan in the late 1800s when the city reversed the flow of its river to keep sewage out of Lake Michigan. The river now flows into a canal system headed for the Mississippi River.

Illinois and the other Great Lakes states fought for decades over how much lake water should flow through the backwards river. And in 1967 the Supreme Court set a daily water limit of 2.1 billion gallons per day, which since then has lowered water levels of Lakes Michigan and Huron by 2.5 inches.

The water can go wherever the state wants.

Water from the diversion is also used to keep water levels in the canal high enough for navigation and dilute pollution in the Chicago River.

More than 200 communities in northeastern Illinois tap into the Chicago diversion for their water supply.

As of 2030, Joliet and its surrounding suburbs will be added to that list.

Who can apply for a diversion under the compact?

Besides diversions that predate the compact, there are few exceptions to who can ask for Great Lakes' water. Communities that straddle the watershed line can apply for a diversion and only need approval from the state governor.

So can communities that sit just outside the basin but are in a county that straddles the watershed line. This application process requires approval from all Great Lakes states as well as Ontario and Quebec.

To date, the Waukesha diversion is the only diversion like this to be approved.

More: [Lake Michigan-Waukesha water pipeline: What to know about the project.](#)

But because of the Supreme Court consent decree, Illinois has a “special exception” in the compact, said Joel Brammeir, the CEO of the Alliance for the Great Lakes.

The state doesn’t need approval from the other states and provinces to divert Lake Michigan’s water to new communities. These communities also don’t need to return treated water back to the lake like the other states do.

What’s wrong with Joliet’s current water supply?

Northeastern Illinois is facing issues with dwindling groundwater supplies from overuse, and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources wants to get communities off an underground aquifer system.

The city of Joliet was expected to run out of water by 2030, according to [one study by the Illinois State Water Survey](#). After exploring other options, they found that Lake Michigan’s water supply would be their best option.

Compact experts like Noah Hall, who worked with environmental organizations during the compact negotiations, said he saw this coming.

It was a major concern for environmental groups because they feared it would be used to attract business, Hall said. Water shouldn’t be for sale, Hall said, it

should be held in trust for the people.

Can other cities sell Great Lakes' water?

Chicago is the only city in the Great Lakes region that has this ability. The city can do whatever it wants with Lake Michigan's diverted water as long as it stays under 2.1 billion gallons per day on average.

Unless the water is in containers that are 5.7 gallons or less. This "water bottle loophole" is another contentious and scrutinized part of the compact.

More: [Great Lakes Compact protects water access. But that doesn't mean thirsty neighbors won't challenge it.](#)

Water bottles, beer or pharmaceutical products are some ways water can leave the Great Lakes watershed. For instance, Blue Triton, formerly known as Nestle, withdrew more than 3 billion gallons of Michigan's groundwater for bottled water between 2005 and 2015. But it was within the container limit, so it's allowed.

According to Hall, the two most contested aspects of the compact were this loophole and water diversions just outside the basin line, like Joliet.

Will Lake Michigan's water continue to be the solution?

Although the Great Lakes seem like a plentiful resource of water, only 1% of the water is renewed every year through rainfall.

Jennifer Bolger Beceda, the executive director of Milwaukee Riverkeeper, believes that the Illinois exception in the compact is driving suburban sprawl and mismanagement of water.

There should be more conservative water planning in this area, Bolger Beceda said. Requiring communities to return treated water to the lake would also help dissuade future diversions because they would become too expensive, she said.

If Illinois ever runs short on its water supply, the state will have to go back to the Supreme Court to ask for more, likely pitting the Great Lakes states against each other once again.

It's in the state's best interest to not only stay within its limits, but also work to reduce the amount of water used over time, Brammeier said.

And one way to do this is to stop using Lake Michigan's water to dilute pollution in the Chicago river, he said. Instead, they should be more aggressive with their conservation methods to help clean up the river.

More: [Restoring continental divide in Chicago would be costly, complex](#)

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