

Beer, Tomatoes and Great Lakes Water, Part 1 (The Compact)

Hi. I'm Jesse Schomberg and you're listening to the Sea Grant Files.

Beer and Tomatoes....folks, that is so much more than my grocery list. This episode of the Sea Grant files was prompted by a question to Sea Grant: "How come microbreweries and tomato farms are allowed to use mass amounts of water from Lake Superior for brewing and irrigation, but companies aren't encouraged to put straight Lake Superior water in a bottle and sell it?"

The answer to this question isn't as simple as you might think.

The Great Lakes have been wrapped up in water tension since the late 1800s, which makes boatloads of sense considering its magnitude. The Great Lakes supply drinking water to 30 million Americans and 10 million Canadians. Combined, the Great Lakes contain about 5,500 cubic miles of water, enough to cover the continental U.S. in 9.5 feet of water ... about 3 meters. That's a lot of water to manage!

Formal bi-national management began in 1909 when the Canadian and U.S. governments created the International Joint Commission. Then, in 1983, the Council of Great Lakes Governors formed to foster collaboration so that they could better manage the vast water resources of the Great Lakes. This year, the Council changed its name to the Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers and continues to focus on encouraging environmentally responsible economic development.

While these entities are imbued with a mighty mission, questions loom about exactly how the big C's – the Commission, and the Conference – are managing five of the planet's largest lakes.

Let's look for a moment to the Great Lakes Charter, established in 1985 between the Governors of the Great Lakes states and the Premiers of the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec. The original agreement, ratified in 1985, was the first in a set of documents aimed at allocating and managing Great Lakes water. Revised and re-signed over the years,

the Charter led to the 2008 Great Lakes Compact that rules today. By signing the compact, states and provinces agreed that they would work together to secure and maintain a proper balance among industrial, commercial, agricultural, water supply, residential, recreational, and other legitimate uses of the water resources of the Basin.

Less formal water agreements preceded the Compact but it was inspired by a 1998 proposal to export over 150 million gallons of Lake Superior water per year to Asia via tankers that spurred Great Lakes states into action. The Ontario Ministry of the Environment approved the proposal but as news of it spread the Ministry quickly learned how passionately opposed to the idea most people were.

The Great Lakes Compact, an agreement between the eight states and two Canadian provinces, makes it nearly impossible for any non-bordering city to get water from the lakes. Within the Compact is the answer to our initial question, “Why can large quantities of beer and tomatoes leave the basin while water – just pure water – cannot?” Agriculture and industry can pull their buckets to the tap if they are located the within the basin, pay for the resource and the resulting product goes primarily back into the local economy. But, through the Compact, Great Lakes states and provinces agreed that containers larger than 5.7 gallons ... that’s 20 liters ... cannot be used to remove water from the basin.

The Compact, however, left it up to states and provinces to determine if smaller containers (such as individual bottles) could be permitted. This resulted in a “bottled-water loophole,” sometimes called the “bottled-water exemption,” which is the focus of the current controversy.

The Compact authors thought that if they made the agreement more stringent, the legislation would not have passed. They set it up so that individual states or provinces could pass more restrictive legislation if necessary. So far, this hasn’t happened.

But THIS has: Nestle Waters North America began operating a bottled water plant in 2002 that tapped into an aquifer of Lake Michigan at 400 gallons of groundwater per minute. A grassroots group sued and after a litigious year, the citizens and Nestle reached a settlement roughly

halving the allowable groundwater extraction. Then, about seven years ago, the same facility obtained permits for a new well and pipeline, and the company renewed permits for a plant in Guelph, Ontario. Both of these activities ignited ongoing debates about whether industries have the right to privatize something held in public trust, like the Great Lakes. The question is whether bottling water from the aquifers that feed the Great Lakes should be seen as ordinary human consumption, commercial production, or export of a treasured natural resource.

Fourteen times as much bottled water is imported into the Great Lakes basin than is exported, according to an International Joint Commission report from 2000.

As climate change puts more heat on freshwater issues, the consumption of water in the production of beer and tomatoes and more – often referred to as virtual water – is demanding closer attention. We'll talk about that in the next episode of The Sea Grant Files.

Until then, kick back and enjoy a microbrew made with our own Superior water – or better yet, pour yourself a glass of pure water right from the tap.

This episode of the Sea Grant Files was produced by Rachel Kuntz, Olivia Dehler, Jennifer Gasperini, Sharon Moen, Mariah Schumacher and, me, Jesse Schomberg. For more information, or to listen to other episodes of the Sea Grant Files visit Minnesota Sea Grant at www.seagrant.umn.edu. You can also follow Minnesota Sea Grant on Facebook or Twitter. Thanks for listening!