

INTERBASIN TRANSFER OF WATER

Interstate and interbasin transfers of water have been made in the past to serve municipalities, industries, energy development, and agriculture. However, approval of those transfers was based on less complete information about their effects on aquatic ecosystems than is now available. It is inevitable that requests for such transfers will be made in the future and will require carefully considered responses.

However, construction costs of large-scale water transfers are high and economic losses in the basin of origin may also be high; environmental costs of water transfers may include quantitative and qualitative changes in lake levels, wetlands, and related fisheries and wildlife, diminished aquifer recharge, and reduced stream flows; lowered water tables may affect ground water quality and cause land subsidence.

Therefore, any diversion plan must include an understanding of the fragility and the incomplete knowledge of the ecologic, economic, and social nature of the area of origin, the area through which the water must pass, and the receiving area; must contain methods for reviewing and adapting the plan to protect the affected areas during all stages of development, operation, termination, and post-termination of the interbasin transfer.

As we look to the future, water transfer decisions will need to incorporate the high costs of moving water, the limited availability of unallocated water, and impacts on the affected ecosystems.

Criteria for evaluating both the decision-making process and the suitability of a proposed interbasin transfer project should include:

1. Ample and effective opportunities for informed public participation in the formulation and analysis of proposed projects;
2. Evaluation of all economic, social, and environmental impacts in the basin of origin, the receiving area, and any area through which the diversion must pass, so that decision makers and the public have adequate information on which to base their conclusions;
3. Examination of all short- and long-term economic costs including, but not limited to, construction, delivery, operation, maintenance, and market interest rate;
4. Examination of alternatives including, but not limited to, supply options, water conservation, water pricing, and reclamation;
5. Participation and review by all affected governments;
6. Accord with international treaties;
6. Procedures for resolution of intergovernmental conflicts;
7. Responsibility for funding is to be borne primarily by the user with no federal subsidy, loan guarantees or use of the borrowing authority of the federal government unless the proposal is determined by all levels of League to be in the national interest;
8. An enforceable intergovernmental agreement with supervision separate from implementation and with assurances that any mitigation offered to alleviate any adverse impacts be financed;

As the waters of the Great Lakes basin are interconnected, the present and future condition of the Great Lakes' ecosystem should be a primary consideration when weighing the water needs of other areas. The Lake Erie Basin Committee recommends that:

9. Water conservation should be a goal of all concerned governments in the Great Lakes Region;
10. All concerned governments in the Great Lakes region should have water accounting systems and should adopt water use plans as a basis for prudent management of the Great Lakes;
11. Canadian interests must be considered in Great Lakes resource decision-making. At a minimum, existing mechanisms for these international discussions, such as the International Joint Commission, and ad hoc technical task forces should be strengthened;
12. Because the Great Lakes are international, future investment and development in the region should include cooperative United States-Canadian management of the water resource;
13. Since the Great Lakes' waters are currently used for multiple and competing purposes, any proposals for additional diversion decisions must take into account the potential impact on ecological, economic, aesthetic, navigational, energy generation, national security, and general welfare values.