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by Jim Siegel

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Sitting behind a desk at the Beaver Park Marina in Lorain, where boats have sailed into Lake Erie for more than 60 years, owner Bill Schaeffer says he doesn't worry about other states tapping into the massive body of fresh water outside his windows.

But he's glad politicians do.

"We are not consciously thinking about it because it's not happening now," he said. "But the minute you allow any kind of activity to occur, it will just snowball.

"We need the clean water. This is our livelihood."

As droughts and population shifts to the South and West jack up demand for water in parts of the country that just don't have much of it, officials in Great Lakes states have done what governments often are criticized for doing too rarely: get proactive. All eight states and two Canadian provinces approved the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact, which ensures that water cannot be diverted outside the Great Lakes basin either by pipeline or tanker.

The Great Lakes hold one-fifth of the world's fresh surface water and 95 percent of such water in the United States. And although there are no plans to siphon water from these pools of "blue gold," no border state wants to gamble that the situation won't change during the next 50 or 100 years, particularly if climate change continues.

"We are definitely leaving the century of oil behind and we are entering the century of water," said Peter Annin, a former Newsweek correspondent and author of *The Great Lakes Water Wars*. "The value globally of fresh, potable water is expected to increase significantly during this century."

It would be "ludicrously expensive" to transport Great Lakes water to states in the West or South, Annin said. But there was a time when the thought of transporting oil across the ocean seemed silly, too.

"The global water picture is grim and predicted to get grimmer," Annin said, rattling off a series of startling statistics: Only 1 percent of the world's water is drinkable and accessible; more than 2 million people die each year because of unsafe water; and the United Nations estimates that by 2025, two-thirds of the world's population will live where water is scarce.

"The Great Lakes are sitting on the Saudi Arabia of a basic commodity of life that is going to become more and more precious," said Jack Shaner, public affairs director for the Ohio Environmental Council. "We cannot take it for granted, or it could slip away."

Not only does Lake Erie provide drinking water to 2.5 million people, but it also generates industrial revenue through shipping and an estimated \$10 billion in tourism from folks such as Justin Baker, 33, who recently drove up from Dry Ridge, Ky., with his family to visit Put-in-Bay, Cedar Point and the Nickel Plate Beach in Huron.

"The lake is clean and nice, though the sand is hotter than a firecracker," Baker said as he finished toweling off his young son. Asked about the potential of other states siphoning off the lake, he said, "I'd hate for that to happen. We've had a great time."

Locals love it, too. Sharing a park bench and some shade at Lakeview Park in Lorain after a successful morning of fishing, Joe Hudak of Westlake and Fred Hileman of Olmsted Falls talked about the beauty of the lake, the concerns about low water levels and the biting walleye. Each was happy to hear that leaders are taking steps to protect the water.

"I remember my father used to say that if you leave man on Earth long enough, he'll completely screw it up," Hileman said. "Now I'm 74, and I'm beginning to understand what he meant."

The push to strengthen protection of the Great Lakes started in 1998 when a Canadian businessman got the idea to make money and help those suffering in Asia by shipping 158 million gallons of lake water per year to the continent via tanker.

The ease with which he got permission was stunning. It required little more than filling out an application and waiting 30 days for approval. Although the resulting public firestorm led to a reversal of his permit, it highlighted the need for tougher laws.

New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson also set off alarm bells in October when, as a presidential candidate, he advocated a national water policy. "States like Wisconsin are awash in water," he told the Las Vegas Sun.

With water problems growing in Southern and Western states, it's easy for Ohio officials to imagine why Great Lakes water could be in high demand.

"There will be a water crisis," said state Rep. Matthew J. Dolan, R-Novelty, who sponsored the compact in Ohio. "When it happens, we want to make sure our waters are protected and we have the fundamental last say in the use of our water."

Although some may see it as selfish for Ohio and others to play keep-away with the world's largest body of fresh water, Dolan makes no apologies. "There are benefits and burdens to every part of the nation," he said. "When those Southern and Western states get all of our citizens who move, I don't recall them standing up, saying, 'Ohio, you have benefited us so much we're going to give you a percentage of their sales tax.' " If water grows scarcer, officials say, one of Ohio's top selling points to businesses could be: We've got plenty of water.

The compact still needs federal approval. The U.S. Senate passed it quickly, and a House committee has taken action. President Bush also is supportive.

Ohio voters will be asked in November to approve a constitutional amendment that supporters say would offer greater protection to private water rights in light of the compact. But some, including Shaner, don't think it's necessary.

"We believe the compact has adequate safeguards to protect against any (Department of Natural Resources) black helicopters swooping down (and) erecting a fence around your pond or water well," he said.

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