

Great Lakes study's lack of clarity muddies issue of water levels

June 24 2009, By Dan Egan

Last year's passage of the Great Lakes compact sent a thundering message to the rest of the country: Every drop of water in the world's largest freshwater system counts.

The eight-state agreement protects the five lakes from thirsty schemers.

But the real threat to lake levels now isn't pumps and pipes.

The threat comes from a warming globe that could cost the lakes as much as 2 feet in the coming decades. And, some argue, it also comes from closed-door decisions being made by leaders of a \$3.6 million study trying to figure out why Lakes Michigan and Huron have already started to lose water -- a study many conservationists say is plagued by a lack of transparency.

The study team has found that erosion in the St. Clair River has indeed lowered Lakes Michigan and Huron, as many conservationists and shoreline property owners have long suspected.

But study team co-chairman Eugene Stakhiv said his team cannot recommend and explore possible fixes.

He said the International Joint Commission, a bi-national body that oversees boundary waters issues between the United States and Canada, specifically told him so. The reason: His team has determined the erosion is nature-caused, not the result of a botched Army Corps of

Engineers dredging project on the St. Clair -- the main outflow for Lakes Michigan and Huron -- as was claimed in a 2004 study funded by a group of Canadian property owners.

"We got a clarification" from the Joint Commission, said Stakhiv, himself a Corps of Engineers employee. "We asked them, 'Can we recommend remediation regardless of cause, if it's natural?' And they said no."

"Our mandate is: If it is man-made or if it is somehow related to dredging, then (we) can recommend remediation. If there are other causes that are not man-made, then no."

The Journal Sentinel went looking for that mandate, but after weeks of searching, Joint Commission staff could not produce any documents or evidence of that explicit order.

To further muddy the issue, Stakhiv's Canadian co-chairman told a completely different story at a public hearing June 11.

Study team co-chairman Ted Yuzyk said at that hearing that the study board sought clarification from the Joint Commission about whether it could recommend remediation for the water loss it had discovered.

"We never got an answer," he told the Journal Sentinel last week.

Yuzyk said the study team therefore decided not to recommend and evaluate potential structures on the St. Clair River to slow the outflow from Lakes Michigan and Huron.

That has riled conservationists, many of whom already were dubious of the study's findings because the study board has yet to release all the scientific reports that drove its conclusions.

"What's going on here is they've cut off the fullness of the exploration we all need in order to make a wise decision about what to do," said [Great Lakes](#) United's John Jackson, a member of the study board's citizen advisory panel.

Jackson said he's not advocating at this point for a structure in the river, but he wants its costs and benefits explored. That, he said, was a primary reason for the study in the first place.

Yuzyk said a fix still could be explored, depending on what the study team learns during the second phase of its study. That will focus on Lake Superior and further analyze the potential impacts of climate change on water levels in the coming decades.

"We recognize it's a serious issue, and we're going to revisit it once we've done our climate models," he said.

Yuzyk said climate could be a much bigger factor than the newly discovered river erosion, which the study team claims has cost the lakes about 4 inches -- a figure he says "is not a very significant amount to remediate for."

Those 4 inches are in addition to a 16-inch loss caused by previous St. Clair dredging that the Army Corps has long acknowledged.

A little perspective: Chicago's 2.1 billion-gallon-a-day diversion is estimated to have permanently dropped the lakes by about 2 inches. The amount of water the city of Waukesha, Wis., controversially hopes to tap from Lake Michigan under terms of the new Great Lakes compact: 18.5 million gallons per day.

Some conservationists doubt the accuracy of the 4-inch estimate and are demanding all the work the scientists used to reach their conclusions. All

of those reports have yet to be released. The reason: The study authors, under political pressure to make their findings public as quickly as possible, released their conclusions May 1 -- before they had received a promised independent peer review of all the science reports that drove the study's conclusions.

That left the public with what citizen advisory panel member Al Steinman, director of Grand Valley State University's Annis Water Resources Institute, has called a "trust-me" document.

Those reports are beginning to trickle out, but Jackson, of Great Lakes United, said his group will not submit any comments on the new study until it has a chance to review all the work.

"We don't want to pre-judge the work," he said.

The public comment period for the study initially was set to expire July 1; it's since been extended to Aug. 1.

The day before the study was released last month, study co-chairman Stakhiv told the Journal Sentinel that all the work that went into it had been independently peer-reviewed. The paper learned that was not the case when it asked to see those reviews.

The Journal Sentinel also learned at that time that the study board was paying its independent peer reviewers for their work. Study spokesman John Nevin initially bristled at the paper's request to see the contracts, arguing that the reviewers would be "offended" and "pissed off."

The Joint Commission eventually agreed to release the contracts, which cover reviews for the St. Clair portion of the study and the second phase that will examine [water](#) levels on Lake Superior.

The amount it is paying to have outside reviewers to assess the work: \$250,000.

Peer-review experts are surprised by the amount of money exchanging hands for a process that is normally done as a professional courtesy -- food, travel and lodging expenses typically are the only compensation reviewers receive.

Sheila Jasanoff, a science and technology studies professor at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, is an expert on peer-review processes connected with public policy.

"Peer reviews of international scientific reports, such as those of the (Intergovernmental) Panel on Climate Change, are not normally subcontractors," she said. "And they are not normally paid things."

The study board, meanwhile, has yet to release a report it commissioned that challenges the study board's own findings that erosion has cost only a 4-inch loss to the lakes and that the riverbed is no longer eroding.

The study board's Web site labels that report as "incomplete."

Its author, however, says the work is done -- he submitted it to the study board April 14. He is the same scientist who wrote the 2004 study that initially discovered the [erosion](#) on the river bottom.

Yuzyk said the report is still being evaluated.

"We're running model runs, trying to reconcile how our results are different," he said.

ON THE WEB

For more information and to comment on the study's findings, go to www.iugls.org/en/home_accueil.htm

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