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Environmentalists Praise Much-Improved Great Lakes “Annex” Water Law Reform Agreements

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June 30, 2005 — Great Lakes environmental groups today applauded the release of two draft agreements designed to prevent most diversions of water out of the Great Lakes and to prevent environmental damage caused by uncontrolled water use inside the basin

“The agreements are a tremendous advance in protecting the Great Lakes environment and economy for decades to come,” said Great Lakes United Executive Director Derek Stack. “Of course, as a compromise among ten jurisdictions, the agreements could still use improvements here and there.”

“After nearly five years’ work, the governors and premiers should be congratulated on completing agreements that significantly increase basin water protection,” Stack said.

The agreements forbid diverting water out of the basin except to near-basin communities for public water supply. Most such diversions would be subject to non-binding review by the ten Great Lakes governors and premiers. In the United States they would also be subject to veto by any governor.

The agreements also require the states and provinces to implement substantial protections against damaging use of lake, stream, and groundwater either inside or outside the basin. Under the proposed new rules, the ten jurisdictions must assure that most proposals to withdraw water take place only if they will not harm the environment and include good water conservation.

“These agreements are a key step in protecting the region’s most important economic resource—our water,” said GLU Senior Coordinator Reg Gilbert. “Agriculture and industry have thrived in the Great Lakes basin because of plentiful water. Future generations will thank us for protecting their economic future.”

The agreements released today substantially improve on versions released last year. An exemption for diversions under 1 million gallons was removed. The few diversions that might someday be permitted must still return all the water (less the amount reasonably lost during normal use), but now may return only Great Lakes water, preventing introduction of invasive species. States and provincial mandates to prevent environmental damage and require water conservation have been strengthened.

“Without water law reform, demand for water from distant states and abuse of water near the Great Lakes have set the stage for eventual water grabs and environmental damage,” Gilbert said. “Passage of these agreements would bring down the curtain on both outside interference in basin water policy and the possibility that we ourselves may eventually damage our most precious economic and cultural possession—the Great Lakes and the rest of our abundant basin water.”

While the new drafts take several steps forward, they also take a few steps back. Certain large proposals for in-basin use in the United States will no longer require a majority vote of the governors. A world precedent-setting proposal that large uses include measures that restore the Great Lakes water system has also been dropped. The agreements also still allow transfer of large quantities of water from one Great Lake to another with requiring that it be returned.

For detailed information on the agreements, connect to www.greatlakesforever.org