**AYC Ecology North**

**April 2013**

**Rep. Miller pushes for re-evaluation of diversion of water from Lake Michigan**

By Gary Heinlein and Marisa Schultz, Detroit News Lansing and Washington Bureau

Even flood-causing April rains in west Michigan and heavy snow in the Upper Peninsula won't be enough to overcome record-low water levels in lakes Michigan and Huron that have led to emergency dredging and plenty of worry.

The growing concern is reflected in a proposal by U.S. Rep. Candice Miller to re-evaluate a longtime pact letting Illinois divert 3,200 cubic feet per second of Lake Michigan water through Chicago's shipping canal to waterways connecting with the Mississippi River.

"It's a negative impact," the Harrison Township Republican said. "Why do our Great Lakes shippers have to be disadvantaged so we can float barges in the Mississippi River? I don't mean to have a water war here, or one state against another, but that's the Great Lakes' water. We are not asking them to give us water. They want our water. I don't think in this day and age it should be allowed."

Miller, co-chairwoman of the House Great Lakes Task Force, is an avid sailor who has crewed in more than two-dozen Port Huron-to-Mackinac races. She ideally would like to see the close of the canal that opened in 1900.

While experts say the diversion drops lake levels just two inches, a skeptical Miller has fired off letters to Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder asking him to revisit the diversion agreement and to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers demanding the agency provide an up-to-date accounting of how much water is being taken. The last such report is more than four years old, she said, while noting Illinois was found to be drawing out more water than permitted as recently as 1994.

The Corps of Engineers data show Illinois also exceeded the cumulative limits between 1988 and 2000.But subsequent reports indicated compliance. The 2009 report said Illinois diverted 3,135 cubic feet per second from the lake — less than permitted.

Snyder "is reviewing and analyzing Rep. Miller's letter and will prepare a response," said spokesman Caleb Buhs, adding the governor "feels strongly that the Great Lakes are the lifeblood of Michigan and the entire region andencourages discussion on their protection."

Snyder and lawmakers last month approved a $21 million plan for emergency dredging in 58 harbors that are nearly inaccessible to boating, a key component of Michigan's $17 million-a-year tourism industry.

Jessica J. Majchrowski,a spokeswoman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Chicago District, said Miller is wrong about the monitoring efforts.

"The annual reports … did not stop in 2009," Majchrowski said in an email. "Diversion accounting is a data and time-intensive process(involving many government agencies)."

Computations for the 2010 report "will be released by the end of this year," she said.

If they show Illinois violated the pact, Miller said, the state should be required to stop diverting Lake Michigan water.

She is not alone in urging action to deal with low water levels.

Michigan Democratic U.S. Sens. Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow are pushing for federal funds designed for harbor maintenance to be used solely for that purpose — an effort that Miller is helping lead in the House. They've also sought disaster funds for Great Lakes dredging.

"We've been able to secure emergency support for dredging, harbor maintenance and other waterway infrastructure, and we're continuing to fight for more protections for the Great Lakes and Michigan's economy," Stabenow said in a statement.

**Commission has a plan**

The International Joint Commission, through which the United States and Canada cooperate on Great Lakes issues, announced it has a new plan for controlling Lake Superior outflows at Sault Ste. Marie to help improve lake levels.

The commission also urged that the United States and Canada consider adding artificial structures to the St. Clair River that would add five to 10 inches to lakes Michigan and Huron.

"Although future water levels are uncertain, we cannot ignore the damage from record low water levels," said Joe Comuzzi, the commission's Canadian chairman.

The commission is focusing on possibly reversing the effects of a dredging "hole" in the St. Clair River near Port Huron and Sarnia, Ontario. Tim Eder, executive director of the Ann Arbor-based Great Lakes Commission, said dredging, sand harvesting and shoreline improvements off the two port cities from the 1930s through the 1960s deepened a stretch of the river so much it caused to a 16-inch drop in lake levels.

The issue flared up in 2005 when Canadian residents along Georgian Bay, atop Lake Huron, obtained an engineers' study linking low water to the St. Clair hole.

The study said the hole increased in size when the Corps of Engineers didn't follow through with costly plans to install anti-erosion structures Eder described as "speed bumps" along the river bottom.

A subsequent $3.5 million Joint Commission study involving 100 scientists and engineers came to a similar conclusion, but also found no significant erosion of the river since 1971.

At the time, the Joint Commission decided reducing the hole would be an uncertain solution with new political implications: lower water in Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie, which borders Ohio.

Robert Nichols, spokesman for Ohio Gov. John Kasich, told The Detroit News last week that Kasich hadn't seen Miller's proposal. While Kasich is concerned about the other lakes, he noted, Erie has remained near its average levels.

Eder said he believes leaders in the Great Lakes states should learn to adjust to the reality that their levels fluctuate.

Precipitation, evaporation and winter ice cover are far bigger factors than manmade diversions affecting lake levels, two scientists with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said at a seminar last week.

**Diversion history**

Chicago’s shipping canal reversed the flow of a stream, drawing water from Lake Michigan through Illinois rivers to the Mississippi. Its 1900 completion was intended to protect the city from flooding and sewage during rainy periods. It’s now a commercial and recreational waterway, controlled by locks near Navy Pier. It’s been a source of contention at times of low lake levels and also, lately, because of concerns Asian carp will swim through it to Lake Michigan. A 1967 U.S. Supreme Court consent decree among Great Lakes states (Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, New York and Illinois) bars Illinois from drawing more than 3,200 cubic feet per second from Lake Michigan. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is charged with monitoring the diversion.