

Former House Speaker Gingrich calls state limits on water 'nutty'

By **JOHN FLESHER**

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TRAVERSE CITY — Newt Gingrich, the former U.S. House speaker, ridiculed Michigan environmental regulators Friday as out-of-control bureaucrats peddling a "nutty" notion that the Great Lakes could run dry.

"Do you know how hard it is to be ideologically so out of touch with reality that you've concluded that Michigan could run out of water?" Gingrich said during a state Chamber of Commerce forum, drawing laughter and applause from the audience.

"Think about it. You've got lakes on three sides. I've seen the map. This is like suggesting that the Upper Peninsula in February will run out of snow. This is nutty."

Gingrich, often mentioned as a potential candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 2008, said in an interview his remarks were directed at the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality's crack-down on bottled water exports.

The DEQ this year granted a permit for Nestle Waters North America Inc. to buy water from the city of Evart for bottling at its Ice Mountain Spring Water plant. But the department said the water could be sold only within the Great Lakes basin, drawing a lawsuit from the company.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm in May banned new or expanded bottled water operations until the Legislature enacts a water withdrawal law.

Bottled water has become a focal point in the debate over preventing diversions of Great Lakes water outside the basin and regulating large-scale withdrawals from the lakes and other sources such as underground aquifers.

Gingrich said there would be reason to worry if, for example, Nevada served notice it wanted to pipe one-third of Lake Michigan's water to the Southwest. But he said by targeting bottled water, the DEQ had reached "a level of bureaucratic micro-management that's silly."

"There are times and places you have to have water use regulation," he said. "I want it to be effective, I want it to be done in a way that is science-based, and I want where possible to use incentives rather than use regulatory control."

DEQ spokesman Bob McCann said the department had never claimed the Great Lakes were in danger of drying up.

"Our concern is that we use our water resources in an intelligent manner to make sure they remain abundant," he said.

Gingrich isn't the first national politician to weigh in on Great Lakes issues. President Bush and his Democratic challenger, Sen. John Kerry, both claimed during the 2004 campaign they would do a better job of preventing water diversions to arid regions.

State Rep. Chris Kolb, House sponsor of Granholm's water regulation plan, said Gingrich's attitude reflected a common misunderstanding about the Great Lakes.

"It looks like there's a lot of water, but only 1 percent is renewable," the Ann Arbor Democrat said.

Sen. Patricia Birkholz, R-Saugatuck, whose Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs Committee is developing groundwater legislation, said Gingrich was correct that the Great Lakes are a rich water source.

"But the bottom line is, we need to protect that resource so we can use it for the vitality of this state," she said.