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New Tool Successfully Protects Michigan's High Quality Rivers and Streams

But budget cuts threaten efforts to implement the Great Lakes Compact

Ann Arbor, Mich. – Michigan's innovative new computer tool designed to reduce adverse impacts to high quality rivers and streams is working, according to new information from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Environment (MDNRE).

“Michigan is deploying cutting edge technology to help protect sensitive rivers and streams from being damaged by water withdrawals,” said Marc Smith, senior policy manager for the National Wildlife Federation. “This pioneering technology is an excellent model for other Great Lakes states to adopt as they continue to implement the Compact.”

The tool is a unique, internet-based system that enables users to easily determine the impact of a specific water withdrawal on a nearby stream. Michigan developed the tool to meet its obligations under the Great Lakes Compact, which protects rivers, lakes and groundwater from large new water withdrawals.

According to new information from MDNRE, 216 withdrawals were processed in the first year under the new screening tool. Of those, 80% (172) were automatically authorized by the tool, meaning that no adverse resource impact was determined. The remaining 20% (44) were subject to further site specific reviews. Upon review, only 3 were determined to cause adverse resource impacts to streams, and were rejected.

“This screening tool has significantly improved oversight of surface and groundwater withdrawals in Michigan and provides users with a fast, simple process to assess the impacts of their proposed withdrawal,” Smith said. “The rejection of damaging withdrawals that would otherwise have proceeded proves that the tool is successfully protecting the most vulnerable fish habitat from harm.”

The process has garnered national recognition for innovation and received national awards for excellence in science.

Despite its proven effectiveness, lack of funding places this innovative tool in jeopardy. Users of the tool are required to pay an annual water reporting fee. But this fee isn't enough to support the program. Meanwhile, general funding has been cut by 90% since 2009. According to MDNRE, a whopping 84% of the tool's users in the past year were agriculture. But the current law exempts agriculture from paying the reporting fee.

In 2008, after years of negotiations among conservationists, industry, agricultural interests, and government officials, Michigan adopted the Compact - an eight-state water management pact that protects the nation's largest surface fresh water resource from depletion and diversions.

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The National Wildlife Federation is America's conservation organization inspiring Americans to protect wildlife for our children's future.

For more information: <http://www.nwf.org/greatlakes>