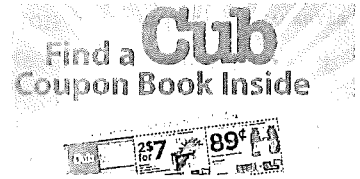


◀ **Call to engage:** Carter turns city speech into summit. **B3**

**Town hall:** Rep. Lewis takes questions in Lakeville. **B2**

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# MINNESOTA

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## It's lawns vs. White Bear Lake

Cities are contesting restrictions on groundwater permits.

By ERIC ROPER  
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An unprecedented order last year to throttle water use in the northeast metro area pitted the freedom to water lawns against the size of White Bear Lake.

The lawns appear to be winning — for now.

Eleven cities are fighting court-imposed residential irrigation bans intended to boost the levels of White Bear Lake, which a judge concluded was receding because nearby wells sucked up too much groundwater. The Legislature moved

this week to pause irrigation bans and other court-ordered changes, which cities say are unfair and ineffective.

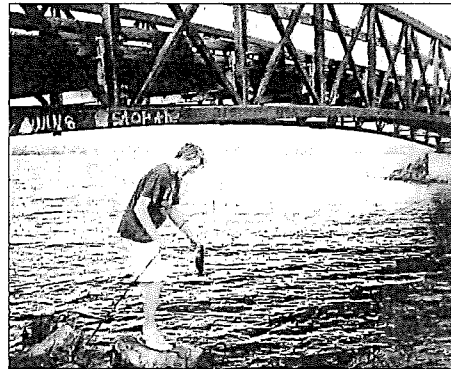
"If you wanted to do a good job managing the resource, you would never do these things," said Bryan Bear, the city administrator of Hugo. "Not only are they impactful and expensive to deal with and inconvenient...but they're also counterproductive."

The problem might not exist if cities pulled their water from the Mississippi River, as Minneapolis and St. Paul do, rather than tapping aquifers deep underground. But the

Legislature hasn't been willing to pay for such a regional system, which the Metropolitan Council estimates could cost between \$150 million and \$620 million depending on how many cities are connected.

Spring was blooming around the lake one recent morning, as blackbirds perched on reeds, turtles surfaced and fisheries staff checked their nets for muskies. A casual observer would be hard-pressed to spot a problem with the lake.

Last year's controversial ruling by Judge Margaret Marrian stemmed from a 2013  
See LAKE on B8 ▶



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Anthony Brooks, a freshman at White Bear Lake high's north campus, released a largemouth bass he caught in the lake.

Drawing water: Map of 44 affected wells and water usage in 2016. **B8**



Christine Tatreau paddled on White Bear Lake Thursday. A judge banned nearby residential irrigation after concluding that wells were drawing too much groundwater and depleting the lake.

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# Cities fight irrigation bans intended to protect lake

◀ **LAKE** from B1 lawsuit filed by White Bear Lake homeowners and other lake advocates against the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR). When the fracas began, the lake was hovering at historically low levels and its shoreline was drying up. It has since rebounded, which U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) experts say is due to unusually high recent rainfall.

"Do I think it makes it harder for people to see the problem? Yeah. I think the wettest three years in recorded history have masked the problem to some extent," said Jim Markoe, president of the White Bear Lake Homeowners Association, pointing to a patch of trees on a now-flooded land bridge in what was once open water.

Markoe wishes cities were responding more proactively to the judge's ruling. He noted that if current trends continue, the Met Council has projected declines in some parts of the Prairie du Chien aquifer by 2030. That aquifer supplies water for 83 communities in the Twin Cities.

"We're 12 years away from a crisis, and White Bear Lake is telling us that the crisis is coming," Markoe said.

The judge's order required

permitted water users within 5 miles of White Bear Lake's shoreline to impose residential irrigation bans if the lake's level fell below a certain point. It also required them to limit per capita water use and plan for a conversion to surface water in the future.

That applied to permits held by White Bear Lake, Lake Elmo, Lino Lakes, Vadnais Heights, North St. Paul, Hugo, Stillwater, Oakdale, Mahtomedi, St. Paul and White Bear Township. It also covered a number of private wells used for golf course irrigation, agricultural irrigation and food processing, among other things.

Nearly a quarter of the water used by Twin Cities residents goes outdoors, largely for irrigation, according to the Met Council. But the DNR, which is appealing the ruling, believes a residential irrigation ban would only affect lake levels by only a few inches each year.

"The very best modeling that we have suggests that the irrigation ban that the court has required us to impose will have very limited effect in terms of raising the lake level," said DNR Assistant Commissioner Barb Naramore.

Ironically, one of the cities fighting the irrigation ban is St.

Paul, whose 400,000 customers got roped into the regulations because the city maintains a number of emergency wells within the 5-mile radius of White Bear Lake.

"To be included in the group of water suppliers being subject to a watering ban when we are 100 percent surface water, it just doesn't make sense," said Steve Schneider, general manager of St. Paul Regional Water Services. "It's not going to impact the level of White Bear Lake."

Other cities, such as White Bear Lake, say it is unfair to put that burden solely on residents and not on commercial or public properties.

"You would find commercial properties and public properties being irrigated—or having the opportunity to irrigate at least—and residents not. And therein lies some conflict," said White Bear Lake City Manager Ellen Richter.

It's also difficult to enforce.

"It will shift the focus into something that's really difficult to do. And that's to convince you and all your neighbors to stop watering the lawn or face some sort of punishment," said Bear, of Hugo. "And it involves the city employing and paying an enforcement staff to really try to make sure

that water isn't used for the wrong purposes any more."

Bear added that limitations on per capita use would encourage cities to build apartment buildings, which consume more water but use less per person.

The cities have challenged the restrictions, putting the new requirements on hold. The bill that passed the Legislature and awaits Gov. Mark Dayton's signature would pause enforcement for a year.

Lake levels also dropped from the late 1980s into the early 1990s, but USGS hydrologist Perry Jones said that was during a major drought. Since then, development has sprawled into the area, and groundwater pumping has accelerated.

Jones said the drop in lake levels between 2003 and 2010 was similar, but there was no drought. "So there was a different factor that we felt was causing that drop," he said.

Unusually high rainfall in recent years has refilled the lake and seeped into the aquifer. But if rain returns to normal, he said, the effects of groundwater pumping may cause the lake to recede once more.

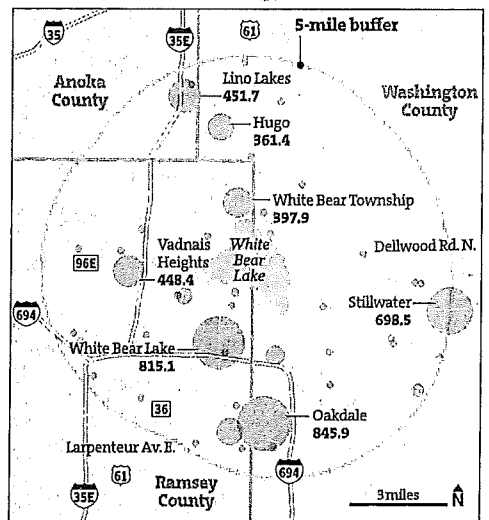
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## RULING'S WIDE IMPACT

A judge's ruling last year to rein in water use around White Bear Lake impacted 44 permitted wells within a five mile radius of the shoreline. All 11 city water providers in the affected area challenged the new limitations, which include an irrigation ban tied to lake levels. Some city leaders say they are unfair and would be ineffective.

### Well location and usage in millions of gallons, 2016

26 million gallons or less ◊ Over 820 million gallons



Sources: MN DNR, NCompass Technologies

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