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**The Golden Era of the Great Lakes Region is yet to come, but we must prepare to capture the opportunity**

In the New North, our climate, our quality of life, and many of our economic activities are tied to the proximity of the lake. We are part of the Great Lakes Region, or the “Fresh Coast” as some are beginning to call the area. But the image of our region is dominated by other terms. While “Heartland” has at least somewhat of a positive connotation, others like “Rust Belt” or “Flyover Country” indicate a perceived lack of opportunity.

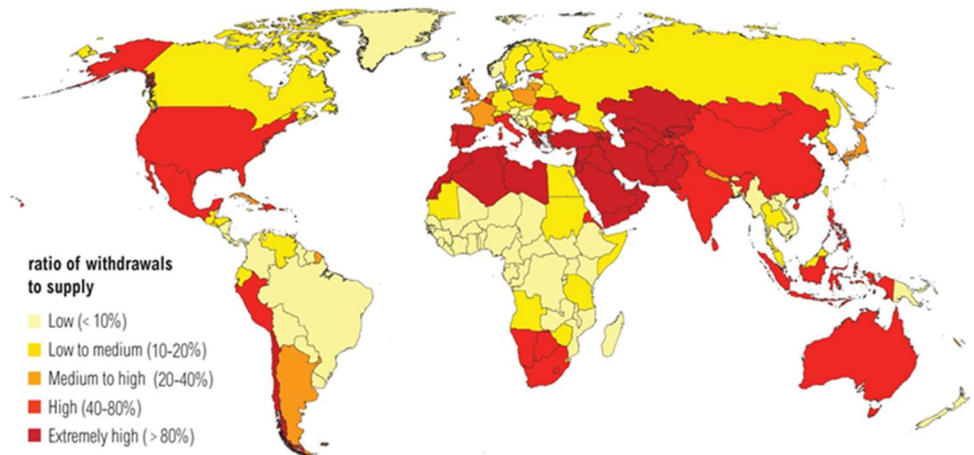
It is time to introduce a new way of thinking: I believe that over the coming decades, the Great Lakes Region will rise to being one of the most prosperous regions in the world. And if we in the New North play our cards just right, we could be among the greatest beneficiaries of that evolution.

Is this just mad, wishful thinking or is there any basis to this claim? Let’s take it one step at a time. Here are the key trends which drive my thinking.

1. Water is becoming an increasingly scarce resource. Our direct access to the world’s greatest freshwater source will become a strategically relevant advantage.

Access to freshwater for consumption or economic use has been taken for granted by many for the longest time. But water scarcity is a topic that no longer applies only to arid parts of Africa. The U.S. Forestry Service predicts that by 2070 nearly half of the 204 freshwater basins in the U.S. may not be able to meet monthly demand. Population growth is responsible in some cases, but climate driven increase in evaporation and reduction in precipitation are bigger drivers. Depending on the further development of climate change factors, these trends could accelerate further.

**Water Stress by Country: 2040**



**NOTE:** Projections are based on a business-as-usual scenario using SSP2 and RCP8.5.

For more: [ow.ly/RiWop](https://ow.ly/RiWop)

Areas like the Southwest, which have historically attracted substantial population growth, are already experiencing water shortage and water stress. Other fast-growing areas may soon share that fate, not just for

short periods of time like in part of the Southeast in recent years, but throughout most of the year. The value of access to abundant water will increase steadily and it will become the driver of shifts in migration, population growth, and economic potential.

One example of long-term impacts: the Himalayan glaciers are melting at an accelerating pace. While this is causing a near term increase in water supplies for some of the world’s most populous areas in China, India and Southeast Asia, the mid- to long-term consequences for these areas will be dramatic. Levels of agricultural production may not be sustainable, leading to the possibility of massive food shortages across many parts of Asia. Only those with access to abundant water will be able to increase their agricultural production to offset these shortages, benefitting from new supply and demand economics.

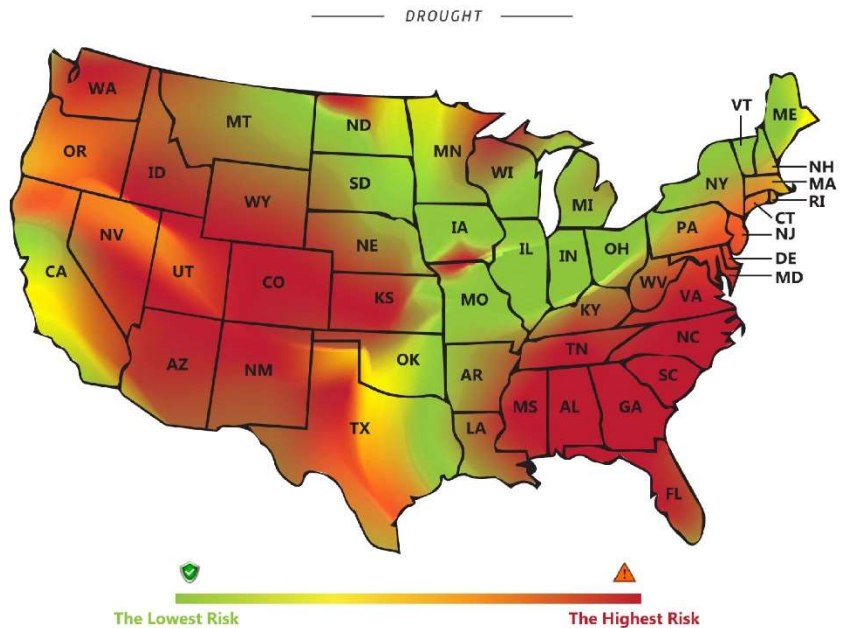
- 2. Frequency and intensity of natural disasters will increase in many parts of the country, but not in the Great Lakes region

The U.N. reports that twice as many natural disasters have occurred in the past 20 years compared to the prior 20 years and identifies climate change as the primary reason. Many scientists are warning that we are reaching “tipping points” in the climate dynamics, which will lead to further acceleration of these trends. Methane reservoirs in the Siberian Tundra are being released due to the thawing of ground that was frozen for centuries. Ocean currents are changing. While some effects are hard to predict, a further increase in natural disasters is a very likely outcome.

We are in the final weeks of the most intense hurricane season in history, which wreaked havoc in many coastal areas. The Western states have been suffering from relentless drought and wildfires. Rising sea levels will be threatening communities along all U.S. shores. Due to our elevation and distance to the coasts, we will be shielded from the most severe impacts. Some climate models predict an increasingly frequent collapse of the polar vortex, leading to severe winter storms and periods of extreme cold. But the devastation brought by such events is not comparable to the other forces referenced above. Aside from the severe cold spells, we may see a moderation of our climate leading to longer growing seasons and more favorable conditions. We could be one of the few regions in the world standing to benefit.

Making a choice on where to live is always a function of the relative attractiveness of various places. The Great Lakes Region stands to gain in relative attractiveness due to the effects of climate change. We may see substantial migration of “climate refugees” within the U.S. but also from other parts of the world to our region. Combined with the effects of water migration, we may see a net population growth in the region which far exceeds recent historical trends. Net population growth then becomes one of the key drivers of economic

### Risk Areas of Natural Disasters and Severe Weather



Source: [www.nrdc.org/health/climate/images/drought\\_large.gif](http://www.nrdc.org/health/climate/images/drought_large.gif)

activity through consumption and investment in infrastructure. At this point, we may not be the “top of mind” choice for people considering a new place to live, so we need to ensure that the advantages of coming to our region are well understood.

### 3. The pandemic and digital access may be recalibrating the growth prospects of urban vs. rural areas

The final story of the Corona Virus has yet to be written. Having spread across the entire country, it is not clear that urban centers were in fact impacted more severely than rural areas (maybe just earlier), but it became apparent to many urban residents that their choices during the pandemic were extremely limited.

Concentration of humans per square mile and intensity of exposure to others in public spaces may well be two of the key risk factors of infections. If you believe that this was a once in a hundred year event, we should soon be back to valuing the hustle of our major cities. But if this was merely a first in a series of future events, many city dwellers will reevaluate the benefits of urban living against the potential safety of living in less populated areas.

Historical migration patterns have almost always pointed to the creation of ever larger cities. If the migration from areas with water scarcity and adverse climatic impact to the Great Lakes Region were to follow that pattern, then we would most likely see a new Megapolis stretching from Milwaukee to Chicago.

But the pandemic has opened the door to an alternative scenario, one in which a substantial part of that migration is directed towards rural areas.



We have an abundance of fertile and affordable land in the New North, we can grow our existing communities or develop new communities designed to appeal to the needs of those looking to relocate. But it will take more than just “watching what happens”.

While people may be willing to trade off certain amenities of the big cities, I believe there will be several non-negotiables. Digital access is increasingly driving economic opportunity, so we need to mitigate any potential gaps and disadvantages our region has. Access to education will be another important consideration, and the very concept of education will be transformed through the pace of technological change and the need to continuously update and upgrade our base of knowledge and skills. We need to start working on concepts to transform our educational offering to the emerging realities of the future of work and the future of learning.

*So now what?*

Each of these trends warrants further research and a more detailed perspective, but I firmly believe that the underlying swing towards positive valuation of our region’s assets will not be inverted, it will be confirmed. It will be just a matter of degree and pace.

That said, we will not be alone in trying to capture the benefit from these trends. The Great Lakes Region - according to the Census definition - includes Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio. If you follow the Wikipedia definition you can add Pennsylvania, New York, and the Canadian Province of Ontario. So there will be others who can tout many of the same advantages. Why will people choose Wisconsin, why will they choose the New North among these various opportunities?

Part of the answer is preparedness and story-telling. Tackling an opportunity of this magnitude requires long term thinking and planning. It requires further research into the nature and timing of key events and into the decision factors that influence people in their migration choices. We need to understand and remediate any potential weaknesses in our region and ready ourselves to tell our story in a way that anticipates these changes and clarifies the benefits of our region. We have to beat the other regions to the opportunity and getting a head start can help a lot.

The Business Intelligence Committee of New North has begun to take a longer-term strategic look, is exploring information needs and developing metrics to satisfy them. That is a modest beginning. We have learned to live with headwinds and we are proud of our resilience. To take advantage of emerging tailwinds, of a once in a lifetime constellation of beneficial factors, we need to do more.

We need to develop a mindset of opportunity. This will be a task requiring the best of many of us. Let's start the conversation.

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*New North, Inc., is a 501(c)3 non-profit, regional marketing and economic development corporation fostering collaboration among private and public sector leaders throughout the 18 counties of Northeast Wisconsin, known as the New North region. The New North brand unites the region both internally and externally around talent development, brand promotion and business development, signifying the collective economic power behind the 18 counties. The counties include Outagamie, Winnebago, Calumet, Waupaca, Brown, Shawano, Oconto, Marinette, Door, Kewaunee, Sheboygan, Manitowoc, Fond du Lac, Green Lake, Marquette, Florence, Menominee and Waushara. The **New North Mission** is to be the catalyst for regional prosperity for all through collaborative action. To find out more information about New North, Inc., please visit our website at [www.thenewnorth.com](http://www.thenewnorth.com).*

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