



Carving the Nutrient Pie

Traditionally, water quality improvements have focused on specific sources of pollution such as discharges or specific water resources such as rivers or lakes. While this approach may solve individual problems, it often fails to help subtle or chronic problems. A watershed protection approach focuses on water resources giving a more complete understanding of overall conditions in an area and the problems that affect those conditions.

Major features of this approach are targeting priority problems, promoting a high level of stakeholder involvement, integrated solutions that make use of the experience and authority of multiple agencies and measuring success through monitoring and other data gathering.

In his opening address to the WEFTEC Conference in Atlanta back in October, former U.S. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt went one step further. "There is no longer such a thing as wastewater," Babbitt said. "All water is part of the water supply and a watershed management approach is needed."

According to Babbitt, the watershed approach is taking place all over the country. In Lake Tahoe, Nevada, no nutrients are allowed to be discharged into the Lake. In Florida, a pact calling for a more natural water delivery system for Everglades National Park was reached between the South Florida Water Management District and US Army Corps of Engineers. Agreements with agriculture (primarily the sugar industry) on cleaning up nutrient enriched waters caused by runoff are geared towards restoring habitats.

On the Mississippi River, besides state and federal regulations aimed at pollution prevention and clean-up, local awareness of the problems combined with the determination to do something about them has resulted in change. Bans on certain pesticides, strict monitoring of industrial discharges and agricultural "best management practices" all aimed at reducing direct (point source) and indirect (non-point source) pollution have helped turn the tide of decline. New proposed total maximum daily limits (TMDLs) will further affect 24 states and new development with regards to the river.

"The water that we drink and that is in our communities is an exact reflection of what is happening on every square acre of land in the entire watershed, from the mouth of the river to the reaches of every single tributary," Babbitt said.

Watershed protection also can lead to greater awareness and support from the public. Once individuals become aware and interested in their watershed, they often become more involved in decision making as well hands-on protection and restoration efforts.

While watersheds are not really a partisan political issue, debate will take place. "Everybody who is in the water business will have some major challenges in managing entire watersheds and managing water quality," Babbitt said. "Carving the nutrient pie will fall on science and politics."

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