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EDITORIAL

By Bill Swichtenberg



Legislation Legacy

Environmental progress in regard to water quality in the United States can be traced to the Clean Water and Safe Drinking Water Acts (SDWA) (see page 19 for details). While both Acts are nearly 30 years old, their inception brought the promise of cleaner, safer water. For the most part, these Acts and their Amendments have delivered as promised, but there still is more work to be done and more battles to fight.

The Clean Water Act (CWA) established as a national priority the ending of the discharge of pollutants into waterways. Virtually every city in the U.S. was required to build and operate a wastewater treatment plant, with the newly formed Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) providing most of the funding and technical assistance. Each state also had to adopt water quality standards, design plans for limiting industrial and municipal discharges and find ways to protect wetlands.

The CWA's commitment to quality has paid off in tremendously reduced pollution levels. However, many problems remain. Last year, for the first time, the biennial national summary of water quality put out by EPA reported that based on water monitoring data reported by states, territories and tribes in 2000, the percentage of impaired river, stream and estuary waters actually has increased. In addition, EPA's "Gap Analysis" estimates that, assuming no growth in revenues, there is a \$270 billion shortfall over 20 years.

The CWA also established a goal of zero discharge of pollutants by 1985 and, as interim goal, water quality that is both "fishable and swimmable" by 1983. Although it now is 2003, these goals have been met only a little over halfway. According to EPA's Water Quality Report, 39 percent of assessed river and stream miles and 45 percent

of assessed lake acres do not meet applicable water quality standards and were found to be impaired for one or more desired uses.

Many times, non-point sources such as polluted runoff are the main causes of this water pollution. To their credit, EPA is presently seeking watershed wide solutions to the problem, bringing together cities and rural communities on a regional basis.

Since the passage of the SDWA, the number of water systems applying some type of treatment to their water has increased. According to several EPA surveys, the percentage of small and medium community water systems that treat their water has steadily increased. For example, in 1976 only 33 percent of systems serving fewer than 100 people provided treatment. In 1995, that number had risen to 69 percent.

Over the last 30 years there have been measurable improvements in water quality. There are no more lakes catching on fire, large pollution-based fish kills are rare and almost all drinking water meets the minimum criteria for health and safety. However, this may have created a false sense of security with the general public. Many Americans assume that these Acts have resolved all water pollution problems. We know this is not the case.

These Acts and our environmental system are predicated on public involvement. Water systems across America rely on citizen advisory committees, rate boards, volunteers and civic leaders to actively protect this resource in every community. The public stewardship of the 1970s must be rekindled in order to achieve the quality levels we desire.

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