



By Benjamin H. Grumbles

'E Pluribus Aqua'

*Collaborating for a more unified,
sustainable water policy*

Just like America, the water sector serving it comes in many sizes, shapes and favors, often with differing and dueling agendas. One of our country's mottos—"E Pluribus Unum"—should inspire water industries, utilities, nongovernment organizations and other institutions to better integrate and coordinate for water's sake.

Water won't respect political or bureaucratic boundaries, but that doesn't mean the reverse has to be true. Increasingly, inspiring efforts are taking shape in watersheds locally and regionally to respect the hydrologic cycle and align man-made creations—from government "boxes" to "box stores." More now! We all stand to gain by improving coordination, while recognizing the degree of difficulty and the wisdom of having some diversity and differentiation for good measure.

Factions & Firewalls

Our nation has traditionally approached water policy from separate places—quality and quantity, surface and underground, point and non-point, onshore and offshore, fresh and marine, wetlands and farmland, biofuels and water, etc.

Poet Robert Frost famously questioned whether "fences make good neighbors." For water policy collaborations, the best answer is no, although fences can actually improve water quality when roaming livestock are involved. There's fertile ground and an historic opportunity for environmental progress across governmental levels and private-sector enterprises. Often the best opportunity for breaking down artificial barriers is at the grassroot, streambank level.

Some Good Starts

America's 4,500-plus local watershed organizations have had some success in bringing divergent players and programs together, but they often face imposing legal, institutional and technological obstacles. Nonetheless, there are some good examples of collaboration if you look.

While at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) from 2002 to 2008, I saw inspiring and precedent-setting collaborations, including: the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration, the Gulf of Mexico Alliance, the Puget Sound Partnership, the Highly Effective Utility Coalition (for sustainable infrastructure among large and small national water and sewer organizations to improve water utility management) and the Source Water Collaborative (for local land-use decisions that reduce pollution threats to upstream drinking water supplies).

But one of the best examples for multidisciplinary, multidimensional collaborations is the Clean Water Act's National Estuary Program, which has been growing and adapting since the 1980s. To date, 28 Estuaries of National Significance are participating and, more importantly, implementing approved Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plans. These citizen-based, bay-saving programs should continue to thrive and adapt as challenges from expanding populations, increasing nutrients and changing climates threaten water quality and ecosystem health.

The Bush administration fostered "Cooperative Conservation" through nonregulatory incentives, market-based approaches and regional collaborations. I hope the Obama administration continues this emphasis and finds the right balance between partnering and regulating, whether on the coast or in the heartland. Without such collaboration, sustainable environmental progress is usually out of reach.

With players so diverse, authorities so diffuse and resources so limited, there's no better way to protect watersheds and communities. I'm optimistic.

Water's New Alliance

One of the most promising starts is the newly formed 501(c)(3) organization Clean Water America Alliance (www.cleanwateramericaalliance.org).

Launched in 2008, with broad public and private support, this coalition of water and environmental interests seeks an informed and inclusive national dialogue on an integrated water policy, with particular focus on urban water sustainability. Keep your eyes on the alliance as it broadens its membership and sharpens its focus on practical solutions. Also know that I'm a new member of the Board of Directors, so you're not getting a totally unbiased perspective here.

Hot Spots of Opportunity

Clean Water America Alliance and others are focusing in on some of today's most pressing challenges: urban storm water; the water, energy and carbon nexus; and adaptation to climate change. Collaboration and innovation in technology, financing and regulation will be key drivers. Congress should continue to probe the legal and institutional barriers to watershed management and ask whether it can increase the use of water quality trading, "green" infrastructure techniques and other cost-effective, nontraditional solutions to 21st century problems. Congress should also pass legislation—modeled on Rep. John Linder's efforts over the last five years—to establish a commission to review and make recommendations on a possible national water policy.

EPA should take bolder steps to continue to advance watershed permitting, water quality trading, wetlands mitigation banking, infrastructure greening and collaborative governing. The National Academy of Sciences' (NAS) 2008 report, "Urban Stormwater Management in the U.S.," lays out some good—but also far-reaching and provocative—ideas on treating the "urban stream syndrome." EPA, Congress and the many storm water stakeholders should take a close look at the scientific data and policy recommendations in the NAS report. They've already begun to review the materials (e.g., a March 19 congressional hearing) and should share their reactions with one another.

Unum

By forging new alliances and forgetting old factions, the water sector has a real chance to promote a more integrated and sustainable policy. It won't happen overnight and it won't be complete, but with unity of purpose and innovation in approach, we can make significant progress in changing the way Americans view, value and manage water. **WWD**

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