



State urged to enact comprehensive water management policies

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This may seem odd to consider with snow on the ground, but in the heat of the summer, how often do you water your lawn? Once a week? Every other day? Every day? What about your neighbors? When we turn on our collective sprinklers, it's easy to imagine water usage peaks in the summer, but now consider this:

According to Sheila Dormody, coordinator for the Coalition for Water Security, "Come the hot months of summer, residential usage actually doubles, even triples above normal amounts – demanding a staggering 13 million additional gallons per day."

According to Harold Ward of the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association (another coalition member), "In 2005, excess summer water usage consumed more water than all of Rhode Island's industry combined for the year."

To many this is just not sustainable, thus the coalition among 15 environmental organizations with funding from \$140,000 in grants was founded last year. Its mission is to urge legislators, officials and the citizens of the state to implement rational water management and usage policies. Amongst these policies, implementing step-based pricing for water, with thrifty users paying the least, and from there on the price rises.

"We need comprehensive policies because water suppliers have no mechanism to allocate water," said Dormody, "and the system in place right now doesn't ensure we have enough water for all our needs when we need it. We have too many straws in the same glass, all sucking up a limited amount of water."

This should sound familiar to anyone who followed the casino debate last fall. More than one community was concerned water pressure would plummet if the proposed casino was built.

So how do we juggle between meeting existing usage, adding new demands to accommodate economic development, and preserving our environment? The coalition believes the answer lies in adopting sweeping changes.

"We have to balance between how much water we withdraw and the impact that has on our natural resources," explains Dormody. For example, she cites what happened to the Hunt River that flows through East Greenwich and North Kingstown: "In 2005, the summer draw-down nearly ran the river dry. That was obviously not good for the ecosystem."

And when the ecosystem suffers, members of the coalition believe we undermine our

most valuable resource, the natural beauty of our state. What to do? The coalition has formulated a list of recommendations for the state to consider:

“Protect our natural resources by requiring the Department of Environmental Management to establish standards for maintaining stream flows and water levels in all rivers, streams, wetlands and natural water bodies. Wherever we take water from, we need to be sure we leave enough water behind.

“Manage water withdrawals by requiring the Water Resources Board to develop and implement a statewide system for authorizing water withdrawals. This would require a lot more communication between the DEM, the Department of Health, and the Public Utilities Commission, as well as buy-in from water suppliers.

“Reduce demand for water by encouraging the PUC to promote incentive pricing to water suppliers that will prompt residential water users to conserve. If you use more you pay more.

“Permanently protect water supplies through land conservation by ensuring that lands acquired with ratepayer or state funds cannot subsequently be sold or developed.”

According to Jane Austin, director of public policy for Save the Bay (one of the coalition’s key members): “Measures like these are needed because odd/even watering just doesn’t work. In fact, usage seems to go up, as if people think they’re supposed to water their lawn every other day.”

Asked whether the coalition would recommend that industrial customers pay more for their greater usage, both Dormody and Austin said no, noting industrial users

are more focused on cost to begin with, so they do a better job of conserving. But they would need to conform to best-usage practices.

“The water suppliers who adopt rate incentives might find their cash flow impacted by their customers’ altered usage,” Austin said. So the coalition would suggest creating a financial buffer mechanism to help secure these businesses during transition.

At the same time, the coalition would like to see more people adopt natural landscaping, as has become prevalent out west where water shortages are common.

“Rhode Island is actually water rich,” concludes Dormody. “By adopting sensible standards and prices, improving communication between agencies that manage various aspects of water usage and quality, and by educating ourselves in how to better conserve water at home, we can ensure we’ll have enough water to keep our state beautiful and economically vibrant.”

The coalition will be holding a statewide conference, “Water for Rhode Island – Today & Tomorrow,” with keynote speaker Amy Vickers and other presenters. The conference is being held today at the Save the Bay Center in Providence. The coalition will also testify before the General Assembly on Wednesday, March 7. For more information on the coalition, visit their Web site at www.coalitionforwatersecurity.org.