

New water coalition unites R.I. environmental groups

By Natalie Myers, Staff Writer

Narragansett Bay gives Rhode Island the reputation of being a water-rich state. But that doesn't mean the water supply isn't a concern for environmentalists, state agencies and economic developers – especially since the Kent County Water Authority announced its inability to guarantee 1.2 million gallons of water per day to Amgen for its West Greenwich biologics plant earlier this year.

Environmentalists in particular have increased their interest in the issue, and last fall, 13 of them formed a Coalition for Water Security.

The founders were brought together by the Rhode Island Foundation, said Harold Ward, a coalition member and former coordinator. That initial meeting, he said, was meant to “find an environmental voice more clearly heard in the State House.”

The meeting evolved into the Coalition for Water Security because “it's an issue that many people were concerned about, but there wasn't a coordinated movement to make sure it would be addressed in an appropriate way,” said Sheila Dormody, the coalition's coordinator and the Rhode Island director of Clean Water Action.

There already were state agencies, such as the R.I. Water Resources Board, that addressed water supply issues in the state, Dormody said. But before the coalition was formed, there were no environmental organizations representing the public interest on this issue.

In addition, the group was seen as a “pilot to see how the coalition idea could work out,” Ward said. If it succeeds at creating a stronger, more unified voice for environmentalists when they are advocating for a single issue, it could be used as a model for future coalitions for other issues.

So far, “I think [we are] heard more, because we are speaking with a single voice,” he said.

The coalition has testified at hearings of the special legislative commission to study all aspects of the Kent County Water Authority.

Ward said the main points of that testimony were “to say the Kent County situation was not unique and could happen in other areas,” and to point out that the state has no system in place to protect stream flows, no way of coordinating withdrawals from a single watershed, and no regulations to ensure that water is used efficiently.

In a report issued in April, called “A Sustainable Approach to Water Supply and Use in Rhode Island,” the coalition suggested that the General Assembly establish a statewide study commission to examine existing and emerging water-supply conditions. “We were told there would be one in the next session,” Ward said.

In the meantime, the coalition has formed four committees to study efficiency of water use, reduction of peak demand, protection of natural resources and management of water withdrawals – all issues the group says are not being monitored with the public interest in mind.

Reduction of peak demand and management of water withdrawals became issues last summer, when the Hunt River nearly dried up due to drought conditions and a lack of communication among the three water suppliers drawing from its aquifers, Ward said.

“The peak demand is in the middle of summer,” he said. “Everybody's watering their lawns. Water demand doubles,” at the same time as river flows are at their lowest. The Water Resources Board is well

aware of the issue, said Juan Mariscal, general manager of the board, which is responsible for overseeing management and planning for the state's water supply.

Mariscal presented a report on the topic to the board in April, he said. The supply board's members include the R.I. Department of Environmental Management, the R.I. Economic Development Corporation, the R.I. Statewide Planning Program, and the R.I. Department of Health.

"There are problems around the state with water," Mariscal said, "though not as acute as what occurred in Hunt River in 2005 or what could occur in the future. [But] we do have problems in the summer months."

He said the board is partnering with the Coalition for Water Security to put together a booklet – outlining water supply concerns and issues, and a few solutions – that will be given to decision-makers across the state.

"I think we both believe we need to be more efficient in the use of water," he said of the two groups.

"Water is an extremely complicated issue. Everyone expects water to just be there in the morning when you wash your face ... there's a lot of planning and activity in order to provide that resource."

One solution advocated by the new coalition is the development and implementation of water conservation programs. Ward said the coalition suggests requiring residents with sprinkler systems to install a sensor that turn sprinklers on and off based on how much moisture is in the ground, rather than on a timer.

The problem is not so much the lack of funding for conservation programs, Dormody said, as it is the time and money it takes to get a plan approved by the R.I. Public Utilities Commission.

The Water Resources Board is in the midst of a project that involves drilling wells in the Big River Management District, which could become a new source of water for central Rhode Island, solving some of the water issues in Kent County.

"We have to plan for the future," Mariscal said. "At

any time, you can have an increase in demand that will outstrip the supply."

"One of the things we are seeing [is], when promoting economic development, there is no cohesive strategy making sure there is enough water for development," Dormody said.

"There's almost no amount of conservation that could have the impact of sound land-use planning, especially on a watershed basis," said Kip Bergstrom, executive director of the R.I. Economic Policy Council, which is also a partner of the coalition. "If you plan it right, you can have enough water to meet household and business needs and have the economic development you want."

Bergstrom said the Economic Policy Council is interested in water because "it's a critical environmental resource and a critical economic resource."

"It's a potential competitive advantage for the state if we do it right," he said. "It's a potential brake on our economic development if we don't do it right."

The new water coalition hopes to "put forward policy suggestions" once its study committees complete their research, said Jane Austin, director of policy and advocacy at Save the Bay and chair of the coalition's efficiency of water use committee.

"I think we are in a position to be much more effective," Austin said. "Combining our voices gives us access to a larger group of people. It allows us to think collectively about what needs to be done. We're using our networks to do that."

Working group members of the Coalition for Water Security include: Clean Water Action, the Conservation Law Foundation, Save the Bay, the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, the Rhode Island Land Trust Council, and the Rhode Island Public Interest Research Group.

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