

ENVIRONMENT

Coalition: R.I. needs statewide water management

BY NICOLE DIONNE

DIONNE@PBN.COM

An alliance led by environmental groups is urging Rhode Island leaders to develop a statewide system to manage water withdrawals; set standards to protect water levels in rivers, streams and wetlands; reduce demand; and protect water supplies through land conservation.

If Rhode Island does not take action in those key areas, says the **Coalition for Water Security**, it's going to outgrow the capacity of its water supply systems, hinder economic development and harm the environment.

"We need clean water to drink, sufficient clean water in the state's streams, lakes and wetlands to protect aquatic life, and reliable water for a vibrant economy," the group said in a report last month outlining its recommendations. "The state is currently blessed with abundant water, but the supply is not inexhaustible."

The topic is on legislators' minds: Last week, the House formed a commission that will spend the next year studying the state's water supply and distribution and its effect on economic development.

Formed by a half-dozen environmental groups in 2005 and joined since then by seven others, plus the **Rhode Island Economic Policy Council**, the coalition is urging the General Assembly to take prompt action. Members already testified

once, on Jan. 24, at a joint meeting of the Senate Committee on Environment and Agriculture and the Committee on Government Oversight, and they plan to testify at another hearing later this month.

"We all lose if no action is taken: the business community, economic development interests and the environment," Beth Collins, director of research at the Economic Policy Council, told senators at the Jan. 24 hearing.

A key part of the coalition's message is that Rhode Island doesn't have a water supply problem, but rather a supply management problem. Not only are the water sources across the state managed by more than 400 different entities – from relatively large boards to individual businesses – but there are no restrictions on how much water is drawn down.

"There are essentially no controls on water withdrawals in the state," said Cynthia Giles, vice president and director of the **Conservation Law Foundation's** Rhode Island advocacy center. "People just take whatever they want."

In her recent testimony, Collins expressed concern about low flows on the Hunt River, in central Rhode Island, and on smaller streams in other parts of the state.

Even the Scituate Reservoir, which for 80 years has ensured that Rhode Island has a water supply that safely exceeds demand in wet and dry years, now has an average demand close to 90 percent of its

"safe yield," Collins testified, and peak demand exceeds the safe yield.

The coalition is recommending that the **R.I. Department of Environmental Management** assess how much water needs to remain in the natural system to maintain water levels and protect ecosystems and establish clear standards to be followed.

Next, the coalition wants the **R.I. Water Resources Board** to develop a statewide system for authorizing water withdrawals, consistent with the DEM standards, and set guidelines so "priority needs are met" in areas where there is competition for limited water resources.

Managing withdrawals also will help protect water sources from potential damage that could make them unusable, said Chip Young, spokesman for the **University of Rhode Island's** Coastal Resources Center. For example, salt water could be drawn into wells, contaminating them. "If that happens, you may as well have cyanide in them," he said.

The coalition is recommending withdrawal management for large users, and probably not for individual wells, but Harold Ward, a retired professor of environmental studies at **Brown University** and a member of the board of trustees of the **Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association**, said overall water usage in the state must also be reduced.

"If that demand isn't reduced, there's no solution," he said.

The coalition's report notes that summertime water use in some suburban communities is "significantly higher," even double, the use for the rest of the year. The problem could be addressed through "proven demand management techniques," the report says.

Jamestown and Block Island have successfully implemented water use restrictions, Giles said, but in many places where "nonessential use" is limited to specific days, for example, the total water usage often goes up.

Ward said the approach may be to charge those who use a reasonable amount of water less than those who use excessive amounts. Giles believes that may help the state's residents to see water as valuable, in the way that people who live on the islands do.

The coalition's fourth recommendation is to permanently protect water supplies through land conservation – not through additional land purchases, but through a declaration by the General Assembly that any lands acquired to protect drinking water supplies "shall be permanently protected and only be used for the purposes which the land was acquired."

Without such a protection, the group's report says, land rights could potentially be sold in the future, "an act that would put our water supplies at risk." ■

'We've come to the end of when we can have a free-for-all.'

CYNTHIA GILES

VP and advocacy center director, Conservation Law Foundation

WATER SUPPLY MANAGEMENT

One of a series of stories about Rhode Island's potential water crisis