



Coalition for Water Security

Jesse Rodrigues, Jr. is concerned about water supply. He was born and raised on Aquidneck Island. He lives here with his family and is the General Manager of Rhode Island Nurseries, a 500-acre nursery in Middletown. Rhode Island Nurseries is part of the “green industry,” whose main business line is growing and maintaining plant materials for use in landscaping. In an effort to minimize water consumption, Jesse grows only native species, which require less water; but still, water is an integral part of his business. Put simply, plants need water, and Jesse needs plenty of it, a little more than eight million gallons per year for irrigation.

Currently, the nursery relies on water from the Newport Water District (NWD), half of which comes through the Portsmouth Water and Fire District (PWFD) distribution system. But Jesse is concerned about the future reliability of these municipal sources, especially in drought conditions; because to sustain and grow his business, a fourth generation endeavor that was founded in 1895, water will be key. So, to increase water supply reliability and decrease risk, Rhode Island Nurseries recently constructed a 4.25 million gallon pond that will be used for irrigation and will allow the nursery to disconnect from the PWFD supply.

Jesse believes that new state regulations for efficiency and withdrawal standards may seem a little pre-emptive to residents of Aquidneck Island, where major water supply impacts have yet to be felt, but his concerns about the need to look at future water availability are not unfounded. Approximately 24 years ago, a nearby nursery built an underground drainage system, and it had never gone dry. But last year, due to a declining groundwater level, it did. He sees other signs of stress too. Some of Jesse’s friends have seen their wells go dry and well drillers are so busy that he has been unable to get a well fixed for months.

Jesse can see the connections between the many different users of water and is concerned about how to strike a fair and sustainable balance. Giving priority use to agriculture helps to protect his access to water. At the same time, though, putting limitations on water use by homeowners and efforts to change landscaping practices to reduce water use could adversely affect his business as well. He will rely on his new pond in times of drought but also says that he would gladly give over to the state his 4.25 million gallon pond for use as a drinking water source, if necessary. After all, although Jesse is a business man who depends on water, he is also a family man who must look out for the health and safety of his own.

