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Water Resources

Federal, State Officials Seek to Cooperate On Protection of Nation's Water Resources

In an era of tightening budgets and aging infrastructure, federal, state, and local collaboration is needed now more than ever to protect the nation's water resources, officials said during a summit on water resources Oct. 25.

Mike Shapiro, the Environmental Protection Agency's deputy assistant administrator for water, cited the need for a watershed approach, expanded coordination with other federal agencies, and strengthened collaboration with states, nongovernmental organizations, and local governments.

Shapiro spoke during a Water Resources Summit sponsored by The Horinko Group held at the University of Maryland.

Forty years after establishment of EPA, he said, the country has made great progress in protecting public health and restoring aquatic ecosystems. Despite that progress, significant challenges remain in reducing nutrient pollution and excess sedimentation and addressing stresses from agriculture, stormwater runoff, and municipal wastewater discharges. Population growth, urbanization, deteriorating infrastructure, and climate change are among those challenges, Shapiro said.

The challenges cannot be addressed solely by isolated regional efforts or by the federal government, Shapiro said. Half of U.S. waters are considered impaired, much of them by nonpoint sources.

Chesapeake Bay Restoration. While there has been a long history of collaboration to restore the Chesapeake Bay, only in recent years has there been action, Shapiro said. The 64,000 square-mile watershed—the largest U.S. estuary—was the subject of a one-page agreement in 1983 between EPA, the states, and the Chesapeake Bay Commission.

But not until 2010, when states agreed to reduce pollutants from point and nonpoint sources through watershed implementation plans, did regulators begin to make progress, Shapiro said. Other federal agencies joined in the effort through the Chesapeake Bay strategy and action plan, he continued.

While some might say the effort has failed because it has taken so long, Shapiro said he disagreed because so many groups now are working together to reduce pollutants in the bay watershed.

Other Collaborative Efforts. Shapiro cited several other models of coordinated efforts between the federal government and other entities. They include the Mississippi River/Gulf of Mexico Watershed Nutrient (Hypoxia) Task Force, the Urban Waters Federal Partnership, the Interagency Climate Change Adaptation Task Force, and collaborative efforts in the Columbia River, Puget Sound, and Great Lakes.

Alexandra Dunn, executive director of the Association of Clean Water Administrators, cited the need for integrative water management approaches to boost efficient water resource allocation. A watershed approach is important because it involves a variety of interested parties. In addition, she said it incorporates scientific information with social and economic concerns and prioritizes resource goals.

Examples of watershed management efforts include those in the Mississippi River, Great Lakes, Long Island Sound, and Delaware River, Dunn said. The federal role in future models should be one of support, assistance, and partnership, Dunn added.

Ann Mills, deputy undersecretary of agriculture for natural resources and environment, called the protection and preservation of freshwater resources “the issue of the century.”

Unlike several years ago, she said people now realize that the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, in addition to EPA, has a significant role in protecting critical water resources. USDA also is putting a lot more money into measuring its success, she said.

One example is the National Resource Inventory Effects Assessment Project.

Mississippi Monitoring Framework. USDA also has been developing a Mississippi Basin Water Quality Monitoring Framework. Under this framework, she said USDA is working with EPA and various groups to monitor water quality and will establish a baseline for illustrating effective and ineffective practices.

Environmental market trading, certainty initiatives that provide incentives to ranchers and farmers to pro-

tect water resources, and conservation innovation grants are among promising approaches, Mills said.

“Regulation alone is not going to get us across the finish line,” Mills added. “Federal and state dollars are going to be fewer and fewer.”

Still, she said, “Government does play a huge role despite the fact that resources are being diminished. We are eager to work with communities across the country.”

By LINDA ROEDER