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Managing our water resources

AS I SEE IT

By Julia Blatt

Would you take a cross-country trip in a car that had no speedometer, gas gauge, rearview mirrors or maps in the glove compartment? I wouldn't.

When allocating water, the state is driving blind, with no road map for the future.

As a result, our rivers and streams are threatened. Poor management has led to over 100 Massachusetts rivers and streams drying up or suffering greatly diminished flows in the summer and early fall. Unchecked sprawl and unwise development means more and more water is pumped out of our aquifers and rivers each year. Dried up and depleted rivers are canaries in the coal mine: a warning to water suppliers, municipal officials and business leaders that the long-term sustainability of the local water supplies — our wells and reservoirs — is in jeopardy, too. If we continue a “business as usual” scenario, 44 communities across the state will exceed their water withdrawal limits by 2020.

To put us back on course, 42 legislators have filed and are supporting the Sustainable Water Resources Act (House Bill 834). This bill directs the state to determine how much water rivers and streams need to support fish and other aquatic life and to use that information to develop stream-flow standards so everyone knows what level of protection our rivers require.

The bill also gives water suppliers new authority to raise funds to protect their water supplies, promote conservation and upgrade pipes, pumps and other water supply infrastructure. It also makes it easier for the state to remove abandoned dams.

The Sustainable Water Resources Act is needed because the state of Massachusetts manages each community's water supply as an island, disconnected from other water supplies. The state does not consider the cumulative impact of multiple water withdrawals in a single river basin such as the Blackstone or Nashua. A recent Department of Fish and Game report showed that of 11 large rivers evaluated for the health of their fish populations, only one is in good health. More importantly, the state lacks goals and standards for how much water to leave in our rivers and streams to keep them healthy and our water supplies safe — we currently have no destination, no road map or way to know if we have arrived.

Massachusetts is not alone in wrestling with stream-flow issues. Maine, Connecticut and Michigan have all recently enacted legislation or revised state regulations to better balance water uses and protect stream flows. Unfortunately, the work in Connecticut is being used to create fear and misunderstanding in Massachusetts. Let me clear up some of these misconceptions.

Connecticut's proposed regulations acknowledge that not all streams and rivers are the same, and that different conditions call for different management strategies. They explicitly create room for “working rivers” where water supply is a primary purpose of the river or stream. And of course, the state can suspend its regulations or requirements in the case of an emergency, such as a severe drought.

More importantly, Massachusetts must develop its own approach to balancing water use. The bill does not impose stream-flow standards from other states. The Sustainable Water Resources Act simply directs the responsible agencies to get on with the process. This will be a public process, with plenty of opportunity for input by water suppliers, residents, businesses, and others.

It is interesting that opposition to providing adequate water for a healthy environment occurs at a time when overall statewide water use is declining, as it is in Worcester. The city of Worcester estimates that its water supply system can provide up to 29.5 million gallons of water per day. Yet currently, the city uses on average of 24 million gallons per day, including the water it sells to other communities. Why not use some of the remaining water to improve the health of local rivers and streams?

Why is this critical now? Climate change models predict dramatic changes to our water resources — hotter, longer summers, increased droughts, and intense rain events. An increasing number of communities will face water shortages in the next decade. Planning now for better management of our water resources clearly makes sense. It also allows water to be a calling card for Massachusetts, enabling growth and attracting new business.

We can act now to make sure that we manage our water resources sustainably, or we can wait until we reach a crisis. By then, the stakes will be higher and solutions more expensive. The Sustainable Water Resources Act is a long overdue step to ensure that our use of water takes into account the needs of our rivers and that our water supplies are sustainably managed into the future.

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