



The Sustainable Water Resources Act

Testimony before the Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources, and Agriculture on HB834

July 22, 2009

Good morning, Chairman Petrucelli, Chairman Straus, and members of the Committee. My name is Julia Blatt and I am the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance, a new organization created to protect Massachusetts rivers and streams. We represent 32 organizations and individuals who share our mission. Our members include some of the state's largest watershed and environmental organizations, some of whom are here today, but also several groups that don't have the resources, such as paid staff, to testify. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on their behalf in support of HB 834.

Water is essential for life, commerce, and the beauty of our state.

Massachusetts receives a generous four feet of rainfall annually, yet some of our rivers and streams dry up in the summer and many more are at risk. The state has identified 160 flow-impaired rivers and streams. The pictures we have brought illustrate this more compellingly than words could: these are dry riverbeds where free-flowing rivers should be (see attached photos). A dry river bed spells disaster, not only for fish and other aquatic life, but for people and businesses who depend on the same water sources that feeds the river. These dry riverbeds and rivers with unnaturally low summer flows indicate that the water supply, whether for people or fish, is mis-managed and therefore, unreliable. Climate change is expected to bring more droughts, which will further undermine water security.

Water shortages across the Commonwealth.

In addition, many communities are facing future water shortages, even without climate change. The Metropolitan Area Planning Council predicts that 44 communities in eastern Massachusetts will exceed their allowable water withdrawals by 2020.

How did we get here?

While water management is a complex issue, three major causes of our current water management problems are addressed by the proposed legislation. These are:

- a lack of information and standards for water managers,
- inadequate replenishment of our water sources,
- and the harm inflicted on our rivers and streams by dams.

Water managers lack of stream flow standards.

Lack of stream flow standards is a major cause of dry river and stream beds in Massachusetts. Currently, we manage dams, withdraw water, and extend sewers without regard to the amount of water our rivers and streams need to support a healthy freshwater community of fish, shellfish, aquatic insects, turtles, frogs, algae and plants. As a result, rivers, streams and the rich aquatic life they support are suffering. It's impossible to know how much water can safely be removed from a river's water source if we don't know how much water we need to keep in the stream to keep it healthy. We need clear goals and flow standards to guide water management decisions.

Ensuring adequate water in our rivers and streams.

The Sustainable Water Resources Act will insure adequate water in our rivers and streams by establishing streamflow standards to ensure that fisheries and other freshwater species are sustained while meeting water supply needs for public health and safety.

Water sources are not adequately replenished.

Disruption of the natural water cycle is another cause of dry river and stream beds. Most of our existing water infrastructure, i.e. all the pipes, pumps, drains, wells and treatment facilities, short circuit the natural water cycle. Water is withdrawn from one location, transported, used, transported again, treated and discharged to a water body far from its source. As a result, the aquifer or reservoir that serves as the original water source, and the river and streams it feeds, are not replenished. Likewise, huge volumes of storm water are transported directly to waterways instead of soaking into ground. Water managers need additional resources to help pay for projects that will help repair the natural water cycle and replenish water sources for both people and fish.

Water banking.

An opt-in "water-banking" feature of the Act authorizes public water suppliers and DPWs to charge a reasonable fee for new water withdrawals or increased sewer use. Funds would be used to conserve water supplies, increase the capacity of wastewater systems and to invest in greener water infrastructure. Measures could include local recharge of storm/wastewater, water reuse, retrofitting properties with water-saving devices, fixing leaky pipes and land acquisition for wellhead protection.

Rivers and streams are damaged by dams.

Dams damage the health of rivers and streams, particularly in polluted rivers with low flows. Dams prevent fish migration and encourage the prolific growth of noxious weeds and algae. Where there are opportunities to remove abandoned dams that have no public benefit, the state should encourage dam removal.

Empowering the Office of Dam Safety.

The Act expands the options offered to dam owners by empowering the Office of Dam Safety to include dam removal as an option for dealing with obsolete dams. Currently, the office's existing authority extends only to the repair of failing dams.

New tools for water managers across the state.

This Act provides new tools to allow water managers at the state, regional and local level to solve these problems and manage our water resources sustainably. Other states, including Vermont, Maine, Connecticut, New Hampshire, New York, Michigan and Florida have taken significant steps to sustain and balance water use in their states. Massachusetts should do the same.

Thank you.