



Government's Role (EPA)

As the primary Federal agency with responsibility for protecting and restoring the nation's waters, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has opportunities to advance watershed protection in a basinwide manner. The Division of Water Quality (DWQ) has welcomed EPA's emphasis on using the watershed approach in planning, permitting, and local government assistance. In recent years, EPA and DWQ have invested considerable effort in streamlining administrative program requirements that hinder watershed approaches and in developing useful watershed tools and services. The following are programs available for the benefit of water resource managers interested in adopting broader watershed approaches.

Providing Financial Assistance

EPA is administering Clean Water Act (CWA) grant programs in ways that encourage watershed protection. The State of North Carolina has taken advantage of many of these funding mechanisms to provide additional dollars for watershed based water quality analysis and protection across the state.

Nonpoint Source Grants

EPA has changed the nonpoint source grants program (CWA Section 319) to provide more flexibility to States to focus on priority watersheds and issues. Under guidance developed by EPA, North Carolina is identifying waters and their watersheds that are impaired by non-point source pollution and unimpaired waters that are threatened by existing or future non-point sources. Through non-point source (NPS) teams, the State is establishing a process to address some of these identified waters by developing detailed watershed assessments and watershed implementation plans and then implementing the plans. The State also disburses money to regional planning entities through the 205(j)(1) grants program which gives priority to basin-based efforts..

State Revolving Loan Funds

EPA is also working with the States to determine how the State Revolving Loan Fund (SRF) (CWA Section 604(b)(3)) can be used to better support watershed protection activities. Traditionally the SRF has been used to finance municipal sewage treatment plant projects. However, in recent years, some States have been using the SRF to fund a variety of other water quality projects including non-point source, estuary, habitat restoration, and stormwater projects. In North Carolina, the construction grants program uses the basinwide plans in establishing priorities for funds allocation.

Avoiding Filtration of Drinking Water Supplies

The Surface Water Treatment Rule requires public water systems to filter their water supplies to remove pathogenic microbiological contaminants. However, if a water supply meets certain source water quality criteria and the community has a watershed program in place that sufficiently protects against these contaminants, EPA allows exemptions from the filtration requirements. Public water suppliers that qualify for these exemptions can

avoid the expense of constructing and operating filtration plants. Over 100 large cities and smaller towns have already taken advantage of this flexibility to avoid the expenses of filtration, while implementing comprehensive watershed protection programs.

Less Monitoring Under the Safe Drinking Water Act

EPA has modified drinking water monitoring and reporting requirements to allow States to grant waivers from those requirements if an assessment of risks in the watershed demonstrates that contamination by certain pollutants is unlikely. Communities that receive waivers can reduce their monitoring and reporting costs by 50-90 percent. State agencies also realize savings because their oversight costs are reduced.

Why Watersheds?

Watersheds are defined in nature by topography which may or may not conform to political boundaries. The watershed land area drains to a waterbody and affects its flow or level, loadings of pollutants, etc. In both a real and figurative sense, a lake or river is a reflection of its watershed. EPA's Office of Water, along with the N.C. Division of Water Quality and many local groups have been emphasizing the importance of organizing water quality improvement efforts on a watershed basis in order to handle water quality issues more effectively. The Water Supply Watershed Protection program conforms to this paradigm and enables local governments to collectively plan to protect their drinking water supplies in a comprehensive manner.