



Water Dialogue

At the beginning of this year, the American Water Resources Association (AWRA) sent a letter to President Bush, House Speaker Hastert and Majority Leader Frist calling on them to address a "growing water crisis." The letter touched on familiar crisis themes such as drought impacts, water quality, budget shortfalls and water rights.

The interesting part of this letter is what it didn't include. There was no mention of the need to throw money at the system as the answer to the problems. Instead, it called for the Administration and Congress to have the government agencies under their authority collaboratively create an "action agenda" to address water resources challenges facing the United States.

The letter's findings were based on the discussions that took place at a National Water Policy Dialogue in September 2002. This discussion included more than 250 water resources experts from the Administration, Congress and state and local officials. Sponsored by the AWRA, the Dialogue had the support of 10 federal agencies and 25 non-federal organizations that deal with water.

From the many recommended actions, clear challenges for the Administration and Congress emerged.

- **Develop a National Water Vision.** Where does the Nation wish to be in 2020? Determine in cooperation with the states and local governments, how the Nation wants to deal with water, address competing goals and objectives (social, environmental and economic) and establish broad priorities for resource expenditures.
- **Formulate a National Water Policy that puts the vision into action.** This is not a call for a policy that directs the actions of federal, state and local governments but rather defines the shared responsi-

bilities at each level for dealing with water.

- **Ensure coordination and collaboration among Federal agencies** at state, regional and local levels; consider incentives for gaining cooperation to reach policy objectives and connect water quality and water quantity for a unified water policy.
- **Deal with water issues on a holistic basis.**

For the first time in a long while, when I read over these recommendations they seemed practical and, more importantly, doable. Of course, this may just be my naiveness to the workings of government. For me, these recommendations are well within the realm of what I think government should do. Instead of backroom deals involving water projects for home districts, this plan (for now) only costs time and mental energy.

I am not saying making a plan will be easy. There also is the issue of where water ranks as a priority to government. Until now, it has been pretty low. However, with tight budget constraints at all levels of government, the time for this plan may be right. How can you decide where the money goes for projects, if you don't have an overall plan or objectives?

The key to these recommendations is collaboration and coordination—maybe not the strengths of government. However, the alternatives for not having a current plan as presented by the Dialogue (e.g., negative impact on economy, legal conflicts, reverse progress of water clean-ups, etc.) should not be taken lightly. Of course, funding issues will take center stage once a plan is in place.

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