

Securing Clean Water: A Secret to Success

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Abstract.—Securing clean water is a primary goal for many agencies, organizations, and concerned citizens. To achieve that goal, agencies have traditionally taken a mostly regulatory approach. In recent years, however, a major trend in government has been to move decision-making and action-taking to the local level. Conservation Districts, watershed organizations, and other local groups have taken on increased roles and responsibilities for ensuring a healthy environment. This relatively new phenomenon, alternatively referred to as “locally led conservation” and the “watershed approach”, is proving to be a secret to success for securing clean water in Arizona and the nation.

Introduction

Protection and enhancement of water quality is a universal goal. This much is known. What is not always so clear is just how best to secure clean water for all. During the past half-century, a series of federal and state laws have been enacted aimed at water quality protection. The Clean Water Act, as amended, and related laws have set up a primarily regulatory framework. In response, most government agency efforts have focused on a top-down, compliance-based approach.

During this same time, however, Conservation Districts and other grassroots organizations have been busy identifying and addressing water quality and other natural resources concerns within their local areas. Formed under state or tribal law, Conservation Districts are empowered to design and carry out voluntary programs of natural resources conservation with the people they serve.

More recently, watershed organizations have been established as forums for people to discuss, educate, and build consensus regarding water quality and other issues of concern. These groups provide support to local conservation efforts, and often sponsor restoration and enhancement projects.

State and federal agencies in Arizona and elsewhere have begun to recognize the value of these local groups in achieving effective, long-lasting solutions to water quality and other natural resource problems. The Arizona Department of Environmental Quality, for example, has identified local groups as key players in the development

and implementation of watershed initiatives in the state. The Arizona Department of Water Resources is actively cooperating with several watershed organizations in putting together local action plans and developing scopes of work for needed research.

Local Conservation and the Watershed Approach

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) defines locally led conservation as “Local people, with leadership from Conservation Districts, assessing natural resource conditions and needs; setting goals; identifying programs and other resources needed to solve these goals; developing proposals and recommendations; implementing solutions; and measuring success” (National Association of Conservation Districts 1998). NACD goes on to state that this process is based on the premise that community members are best suited to identify and resolve natural resource problems, and that locally led conservation focuses on voluntary, incentive-based approaches before use of regulatory measures.

With the passage of the 1996 Farm Bill, Conservation Districts were given an even greater role in ensuring that local conservation priorities are addressed. Conservation Districts are now responsible for convening local work groups and soliciting broad public involvement for the development of the local conservation program. Traditionally, Conservation Districts have worked hand in hand with cooperating land owners and partner agencies such as the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the State conservation agency. Now more than ever, however, the emphasis is on direct participation by citizens, organizations, and interested local, state and federal agencies. This process assures that the needs of all affected parties are considered and included.

The “watershed approach” is a term used by many agencies and organizations to describe a comprehensive process whereby local people and interested organizations and agencies (stakeholders) work together to address natural resources and related issues within a geographic area, usually a hydrologic drainage basin. The Environmental Protection Agency characterizes the watershed approach as consisting of three main principles

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(Environmental Protection Agency 1991). First, target watersheds should be those where pollution poses the greatest risk to human health, ecologic resources, desirable uses of the water, or a combination of these. Second, all parties with a stake in the specific local situation should participate in the analysis of problems and the creation of solutions. Third, actions undertaken should draw on the full range of methods and tools available, integrating them into a coordinated, multi-organization attack on the problems.

The recent synthesis of these two complementary philosophies has resulted in a successful formula for addressing water quality and other natural resources issues in Arizona and in many other areas of the country.

An Arizona Success Story

The Verde River Watershed covers 6,600 square miles in the heart of central Arizona. One of the state's largest perennial streams, the Verde River is free-flowing for about 125 miles before reaching Horseshoe Reservoir near Phoenix. The watershed is a major source of water for the Phoenix metropolitan area. Numerous state parks, wilderness areas, national monuments and national forests lie within the watershed. Four American Indian communities are present. Six Natural Resource Conservation Districts (NRCD's) serve the people of the watershed.

The Verde River Watershed has experienced tremendous change in recent years. The population has surged as people flock to the area to partake of the scenic vistas, temperate climate, and abundant recreational opportunities. Timber harvesting and other natural resource uses are declining, while recreation use in its many forms is on the rise. Agricultural lands have been subdivided and built upon. Water use has increased to meet the needs of the new residents. Water quality has remained generally good, and people want to keep it that way. These rapid changes present significant challenges for the Conservation Districts and others working to sustain the health of the watershed.

To meet these challenges, the Conservation Districts of the watershed are leading local programs of natural resources conservation. The main staple of these programs is day-to-day assistance to individual land owners for planning and applying soil and water conservation practices on their property. These projects are designed to conserve water, maintain and improve water quality, reduce erosion, and protect and restore riparian areas and other sensitive habitat. In addition to the basic conservation program, the Big Sandy, Chino Winds, Coconino, and Verde NRCD's recently established Geographic Priority Area projects under the USDA's Environmental Quality

Incentives Program. Through these special projects, local people are receiving accelerated educational, technical and financial assistance for installing needed conservation measures on private and state lands.

The Verde Watershed Association (VWA), organized nearly a decade ago, is a forum for bringing together people representing the many varied interests throughout the watershed. Membership in the VWA includes residents, organizations, NRCD's, and representatives of local, state and federal agencies. The VWA engages the public in local natural resources issues through regular meetings, a monthly newsletter, and by pursuing scientific research to increase the level of understanding of the watershed's land and water resources. Agencies routinely look to VWA as a valuable source of input and support in developing and implementing action plans and strategies.

Summary

Locally led conservation, using a watershed approach, is the secret to success for securing clean water and a healthy environment. Local leadership, from Conservation Districts, watershed organizations, and other local groups, is key to this success. Experience has shown that local people, when given the opportunity, and provided the necessary support, are most capable of resolving the natural resources problems affecting their area. The challenge before those of us involved in water quality protection and natural resources conservation is to continue to work towards making local empowerment for action the way of doing business.

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