




WATERSHED PROGRESS: New York City Watershed Agreement

A black and white aerial photograph of a large watershed reservoir, showing a winding river or stream flowing through a forested valley towards a large body of water in the distance. The terrain is hilly and densely wooded.

"...we have put aside the suspicions that have existed far too long between the downstate communities and their upstate neighbors. This agreement does what many thought impossible: it protects the 1,900 square mile watershed from degradation while allowing upstate communities the ability to grow and develop in an environmentally responsible manner."

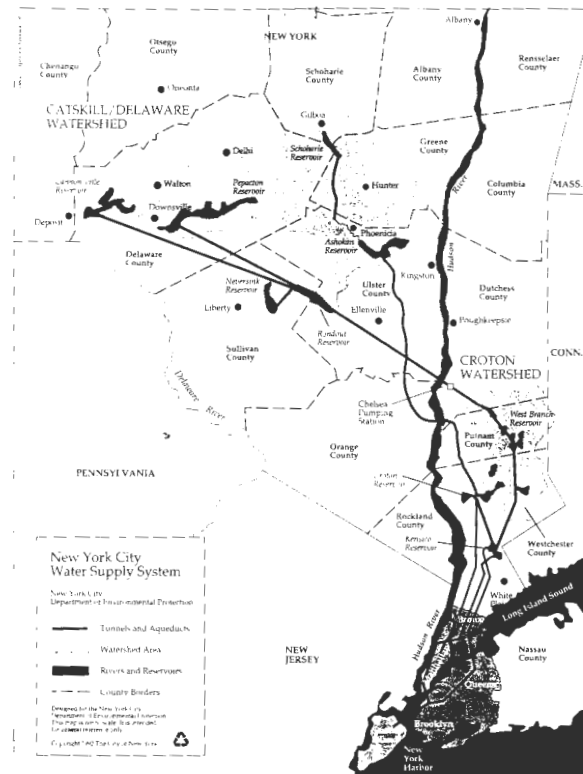
- Governor Pataki, State of New York

Since 1991, the U.S. EPA has been promoting the watershed approach as a mechanism to achieve the next generation of water protection. The focus on watersheds, or drainage areas, provides people living there a meaningful context in which to identify problems and solutions. Below is a description of the New York City Watershed agreement where the watershed approach is making a difference.

The system:

Nine million residents of New York City and surrounding suburbs rely on a series of reservoirs located many miles away in the Catskill, Delaware and Croton watersheds in upstate New York as the source of their drinking water. The first reservoir was constructed in the 1870s and the last one was built in 1967. The three watersheds cover an area about the size of Delaware, and a portion of eight counties, 60 towns, and 11 incorporated villages.

The Catskill/Delaware watersheds cover approximately 1,600 square miles with a population of around 77,000 year round. There are approximately 350 farms in the Delaware and Catskill watersheds, a majority of which are dairy. EPA has issued a filtration avoidance determination for these watersheds, while the water from the Croton must be filtered.



The stresses:

The main stresses to the system include phosphorus, microbial pathogens, and polluted runoff. The primary sources of the pollution are wastewater discharges, and runoff from urban and agricultural sources.

The strategy:

In 1991, EPA granted a conditional filtration waiver to the City of New York which was re-issued in 1993. In an effort to comply with EPA's requirements and protect the city's water supply and the rights of the residents in the upstate counties, the governor formed an ad hoc committee to negotiate an agreement. A key issue was whether the city could work with the upstate communities to avoid having to filter the Catskill/Delaware system - a costly proposition. In addition, there were controversies associated with the costs of complying with regulations and how land would be acquired for protection. The committee was composed of

representatives from New York City, New York State, communities of the watershed, environmental interests and the U.S. EPA, and employed a consensus-building approach to negotiating an agreement.

An agreement was reached where EPA is expected to extend the city's filtration waiver to December 1999. In return, the city will take several actions including upgrading wastewater treatment facilities and instituting rules and regulations in the watershed. The city will also acquire land and support upstate/downstate partnership programs (water quality investment, economic development fund, and a regional watershed partnership council). The communities upstate will have the opportunity to sell property if they so choose. In addition, they will participate in the regional watershed partnership council which will also be composed of state, city, and downstate consumers.



Watershed Agricultural Program Pilot Farm

"I applaud the Governor for his extraordinary vision, and for bringing about this historic accord, which many believed could never be accomplished. His leadership helped forge this deal...He has helped all of us find common ground as citizens of one state and as people sharing the same environment."

New York City Mayor Guliani

Measures of Success:

The agreement is a success in that it moves the city and state beyond the controversy in which it was embroiled for so many years toward goals and solutions under which all parties could unite. Because of the agreement, regulations will be issued, land critical to the health of the watersheds will be purchased, and wastewater treatment systems will be upgraded. In addition, New York City's drinking water consumers will benefit from the cost savings of avoiding filtration. *For further information about the New York City Watershed Protection Program, please call 718-595-5371.*



Sewage Treatment

"Because of the commitment of all those involved, we were able to come together and work toward a long and lasting partnership among Westchester, NY, and the entire watershed community."

- Westchester County Executive Andrew O'Rourke

EPA's Role

EPA Region 2 was a key player in the negotiations among the New York City watershed interests. EPA agreed to extend New York City's filtration avoidance determination, allowing time to implement its strategy to prevent pollution and update treatment systems. For more information, contact EPA Region 2 at (212) 637-3724.

Nationally, EPA has been reorienting its programs and developing tools to facilitate the watershed approach since 1991. For more information on the watershed approach, please contact the EPA at Office of Wetlands, Oceans and Watersheds, 401 M Street, S.W. 4501F, Washington, DC 20460 (Attention: Watershed Outreach coordinator) or visit us on the world-wide web at URL:<http://www.epa.gov/OW/OWOW>.