

COMMENTS OF ROBERT K. KAUFMAN  
TO THE  
HOUSE ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES  
AND  
ENERGY COMMITTEE

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I am the Chairman of the Clarion Conservation District

1st Vice President, Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts

President, Western Pennsylvania Coalition for Abandoned Mine Reclamation

Member, Mill Creek Coalition

President, Clarion River Basin Commission - a five county organization to abate pollution along the Clarion River.

The title of this session today certainly implies that wetlands issues and legislation are important, whether you are for them or against them. On the against them side please remember that a dozen years ago and before, the Feds, through the Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service -SCS - now NRCS and the ASCS , were designing and cost sharing drainage projects for farm fields - get the water out - get the plow in. Urban development was much the same. Get the storm water out of my development as soon as possible and control flooding with Corps of Engineers dams and SCS 566 channelization projects.

But thinking about how to handle rain has recently changed. Consciously or not, the idea that maybe Mother Nature knew what she was doing came into the minds of planners. Maybe we shouldn't drain the bogs and straighten out the stream channels. If we left them alone, storm water wouldn't be such a problem and those downstream, whether in the Bay, the Delaware, or the Ohio, wouldn't have to suffer from problems that we up-streamers generated.

There are other aspects of water management that affect us and that we affect. Before our forefathers cut down the forests of Penns Woods, mined the coal that fueled the industrial revolution in America and forged the weapons of our wars, and drilled for the oil and gas that heats our homes and industries, again Mother Nature washed out of the earth minerals that polluted the waters of the Commonwealth. But she also provided a remedy in the bogs and marshes which, through natural processes, removed much of the contaminants.

Now, and in the somewhat recent past, those resource utilization activities have greatly increased the harmful mineral loading of our streams and rivers.

The last issue of water management that I want to mention is ground water, the aquifers that provide water for most people in rural Pennsylvania and to a considerable extent those in urban areas. As you know, the aquifers don't make water. They have to be recharged - and the recharge mechanism are wetlands. However, not all marches contribute to recharge. A farm pond must have an impervious lining, usually clay, and, in general, an on lot sewage system must not have one. For the same reasons, some wetlands permit water to flow to the aquifers and some do not.

Now to get to the point of why I am interested in wetlands. Specifically, wetlands have a major influence on water quality. I like trout and suckers and catfish and frogs and canada geese. But I also like people and all of the above need quality water. Tourism, recreation, hunting, fishing are important to many of us but the water that comes out of the tap is of critical importance to all of us. To make much of the Commonwealth's water potable and commercially and industrially usable, we must remove contaminants either by human or Mother Nature's systems.

I am a conservationist. I believe in the conservation of our natural resources, not preservation at all costs. I would urge you to reach an appropriate balance between the use of our natural resources for the economic and social benefit of people today and the preservation of resources for tomorrow.

In order to reach that objective, the first requirement is to arrive at a universal definition for wetlands. Unlike people, all wetlands are not created equal and the definition must take this into account. If a wet spot is small, contributes little or nothing to water quality improvement or aquifer recharge and breeds mosquitoes, does it need protection? If it has medium characteristics, can mitigation be a solution. Incidentally, there have been some mitigation projects constructed in the Commonwealth where the cost to taxpayers has been all out of proportion to the benefits gained.

And finally, is the issue of compensation. We now deny mining permits in cases where it is apparent that water degradation problems would arise. This is proper, and is no different than denying a swamp draining permit where major damage to the public interest would occur. We get back to the definition problem.

Again, I urge you to take a conservation approach to the wetlands legislation problem and not to be preservationists at all costs.

Thank you