How To Get Started: Protecting Your Watershed From Polluted Runoff

SC NEMO Fact Sheet #5

KEY FINDING

Protecting your watershed's resources from polluted runoff requires the involvement of many municipal departments and commissions, as well as other sectors of the community. A coordinated approach, combined with a clearly stated goal of protecting your region's waterways, is an excellent way to start.

THE PROBLEM

Nonpoint source pollution, or polluted runoff, is the cumulative result of a multitude of personal and municipal actions (see SC NEMO Fact Sheet #2). As such, only an organized, collaborative approach to solving the problem will be successful. Local land use decisions will continue to be made on a case-by-case basis. However, an action plan incorporating certain key elements into the local decision-making process will serve to strengthen and consolidate your effort to protect regional waterways.

A COORDINATED APPROACH TO POLLUTED RUNOFF: KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Communication--Many municipal commissions and departments must be involved in managing polluted runoff. For instance, the zoning commission makes land use decisions, the planning commission determines the general direction of future development and the public works department oversees design, construction, maintenance and repair of roadways and catch basins. Each one of these players must be informed about their role in protecting water resources, as well as the roles of other players and how they fit together. In other words, a plan is needed. In some regions, this has meant a new board or group (many times ad hoc) made up of representatives of the key players. Some examples of who might be involved include planning, zoning, wetlands, harbor and conservation commissions; public works and public health departments; water and sewer, erosion control, economic development and finance boards; and grassroots and civic organizations.

Legal Requirements--Depending on the location and size of your county or municipality, a number of recent federal and state laws on polluted runoff management may soon be coming your way (if they haven't already!). These include stormwater permitting and, in the coastal zone, new requirements related to coastal zone management. In addition, many states have enacted legislation affecting a range of local activities, from zoning decisions to septic system repair to setback requirements for development near wetlands and waterways. Local officials need to be aware of these laws, both from the standpoint of compliance and with regard to the authority that they confer to municipalities wishing to aggressively manage polluted runoff. The SC Department of Health and Environmental Control (SC DHEC) Bureau of Water and SC DHEC Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management (OCRM) are usually the best place to call for information about these laws (see last section).

Focus--As part of a regional effort to control polluted runoff, there are certain basic things

that may be done "across the board" for all existing areas or planned developments, such as requiring stormwater controls and minimizing the amount of impervious surfaces (see SC NEMO Fact Sheets #3 and #4). However, this does not preclude an approach that focuses on identifying and protecting your most important water resources. Your priorities will likely be set based on a combination of water resource information and the needs of the local populace. For instance, the primary goal might be improving the water quality of a lake, creek or inlet, or it could be protecting a relatively pristine reservoir or critical groundwater recharge area. The NEMO technique of doing a zoning build-out analysis is only one way to help assess the threats to your waterways - many other analytical techniques exist, from digging out old reports to taking field samples. Expertise can be found in many places, including consulting firms, local residents, state agencies, universities or your own local government.

Financing--Unfortunately, the rising tide of new nonpoint source regulatory programs has not yet resulted in a significant increase in funding sources. Currently available federal and state technical and funding sources are listed at the end of this fact sheet. It's clear, however, that local funding will have to account for most of the expenses involved in polluted runoff programs. General funds, capital funds, special tax districts (like stormwater utility fees), and local bond issues are all options. Costs associated with new development can and should be negotiated with the developers. A couple of positive things to remember include: 1) preventing pollution is by far the most cost-effective way to protect your resources, and 2) many of the nonstructural best management practices involving reduced impervious surface and use of vegetation can actually save you money compared to conventional development.

Remember, the most important step in the process - a clearly stated desire on the part of the local government to protect its water resources from polluted runoff - takes no technical or legal expertise.

WHAT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CAN DO: SUGGESTIONS FOR AN ACTION PLAN

The technical aspects of polluted runoff can be complicated. However, just because your local government doesn't have a water quality expert or 20 years of monitoring data doesn't mean that you can't protect your water resources. There are a number of places to get help (see last section), and remember, communication is the most important aspect of any action plan. You are the final judge as to what will work in your town or county, but here are some suggestions:

1. Form an ad hoc committee of members of various appropriate commissions and departments to get the ball rolling. Remember to get the blessing of the chief elected official.
2. Educate yourself and your key commissions on the basics of polluted runoff and its management through programs and materials like those available through the NEMO Project and DHEC.
3. Seek local, state or private help to assess your region's water resources. Which are most valuable to your area (economically, historically, and socially)? Which are most impaired, or endangered, by polluted runoff? Are there any water resources deemed especially important by state or federal agencies? Weigh these factors and try to come up with a consensus priority list.
4. Assess what, if anything, your town or county is currently doing about polluted runoff. Factors to be inventoried include erosion control requirements, subdivision regulations, maintenance of roads and storm drains, open space plans and any setback or buffer zone requirements.
5. Write and issue a polluted runoff policy statement, laying out the importance of polluted runoff management and the commitment to address this problem.
6. Go ahead and dive in!! Write a brief Action Plan that spells out the roles of each of the key commissions/departments represented on the ad hoc committee. Don't forget funding, maintenance and other points you'd just as soon forget!
7. Hold an educational meeting for all the commissions/departments and the public to brief them on your work and the Action Plan, and get comments. You can also use the media to raise awareness of the problem through things like newspaper articles on the Action Plan, or public service announcements on local television stations.
8. Incorporate your Action Plan into the appropriate town or county plans, procedures and regulations.

CAN WE REALLY DO THIS?

Absolutely. Remember, the most important step in the process - a clearly stated desire on the part of the local government to protect its water resources from polluted runoff - takes no technical or legal expertise. Establishing that priority, articulating it in local policy and setting up a framework for internal cooperation and communication will provide a solid foundation for all that follows.

RESOURCES TO HELP YOU BEGIN

Listed below are a few key places to find additional information on the technical aspects of managing polluted runoff, and some financial resources available.

Technical Information: Five Places to Start

1. SC Sea Grant Extension Program/Clemson University Extension Service
2. SC DHEC – Bureau of Water
3. SC DHEC – Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management
4. Council of Governments/Regional Planning Agencies
5. Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Funding Information:
SC DHEC
USEPA

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