

From the Secretary's Desk: Clean Water, Prosperous Vermont



ANR Secretary Deb Markowitz

When I turn on the tap in the morning to brush my teeth I take for granted that the water flowing into my sink is safe to drink. When I swim in the local pond I don't worry about getting sick. When I go fishing (fly-fishing is my midlife diversion!), I don't stop to think about whether the stream is healthy enough for the fish to thrive.

Like most Vermonters, I don't often stop to think about the importance of clean water to our economy and way of life. As the Secretary of the Agency of Natural Resources I know well that Vermont's economic success is grounded in our well-managed natural resources. Businesses rely on access to clean water – including our farms, microchip manufacturers, the outdoor industry, our breweries and more; and communities with well-managed natural resources, particularly clean water, are more attractive to live in, and better places to invest.

I am also aware that as a nation and as a state we have not kept up with needed investments in critical water and wastewater infrastructure and with stormwater management. We need to remember that, in Vermont, our citizens are able to drink water from their taps because we have invested in protecting our waters. But we could be doing more.

Indeed, the Federal Government, stalled by partisan gridlock in Congress, has reduced funding for clean water infrastructure investments to only a fraction of what we spent during the 1970's and 1980's, even as our needs are greater than ever before. In Vermont, we will be facing significant costs to implement programs to better control polluted runoff into Lake Champlain. The wide-reaching blue-green algae blooms we saw this summer pose threats to businesses, property values and to public health and demonstrate how critical it is to implement the ambitious Lake Champlain clean-up plan that was signed by the governor earlier this year.

Working with others, we are exploring better ways to build roads, control and manage stormwater, and treat wastewater. By using green stormwater infrastructure to let our natural systems control and treat rain and snowmelt, we can prevent pollution from being washed into our streams, rivers, ponds and lakes.

In Vermont and across the country we have become increasingly aware of our intimate relationship with and reliance upon healthy watersheds as we experience an increase in the intensity and frequency of droughts, floods, and extreme weather events. Healthy watersheds mean functioning wetlands and floodplains, giving our rivers room to move, preventing contamination and overdrawing of our groundwater.

We must be committed to protecting the natural systems that keep our water clean, and making needed investments to protect and improve water quality in Vermont, but we cannot do it alone. We will only make progress if we work together across the spectrum of government, business, academia, and citizen groups to ensure that everyone has access to clean water for drinking, swimming, fishing and boating.