



The New York Water Environment Association, Inc.

The Water Quality Management Professionals

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RE: Environmental Advocates Report – Turning a Blind Eye to Illegal Pollution

Dear Editor:

There is a shortage of funds for keeping our rivers, streams and lakes clean, but it is completely different from that singled out in the recent Environmental Advocates report suggesting that the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is failing to keep “polluters” in check. This misplaced effort fights yesterday’s battles and fails to fully address the real challenges of today. A productive dialogue would focus on finding new sources of money to repair pipes and treatment plants, and most fundamentally, on creating a consensus about prioritizing infrastructure investments that yield the most sustainable benefits.

Water Utility Executives take great pride in protecting our state’s environment and, as DEC’s partners, serving New Yorkers. Across New York State there are over six hundred wastewater treatment facilities that serve 1,610 municipalities and provide wastewater treatment for more than 15 million people. We represent millions of ratepayers from every corner of New York State from the shores of Lake Erie to the estuaries of Long Island in communities large and small, and in urban, suburban and rural areas. We manage thousands of people that work every day to protect our State’s waterways from harmful pollution using state of the art technology, ingenuity and know how. We are not polluters; we are in fact hands-on environmental professionals who take responsibility for successfully implementing the letter and intent of the U.S. Clean Water Act to turn pollution into resources.

We welcome an honest dialogue on how we might best continue to improve the health of our State’s waterways. We’ve come a long way since New York State led the nation on this front with the 1965 Pure Water’s Bond Act, a precursor to the enactment of the Federal Clean Water Act in 1972. Many of our treatment systems built in the early days of this struggle are now reaching the end of their useful life and require costly replacement or repair. Moreover, advancements in technologies that improve our wastewater treatment processes and reduce our energy and staffing demands, require increased capital to deploy and maintain. Currently, our industry no longer views wastewater as pollution but as a potential resource to be recovered (through water

reuse and other measures), by implementing new technology to accomplish these goals. On a case by case basis, we need to determine the best way to allocate funding from our ratepayers, since there are virtually no grants or loans from the federal government or the state, as was the case from the 1960s to the 1980s.

What we need, is to change the dialogue in our state from one that suggests DEC is somehow failing to police polluters, to one that celebrates our collective successes in achieving vast water quality improvements to date and champions a new way forward. We must collectively do more to educate our customers about where their water and sewer fees are invested and how any necessary increases in their annual charges will help to improve and protect our environment while protecting public health for generations to come.

Finally, we must continue to work together to ensure we are using up-to-date, peer reviewed scientific evidence before we impose further permit limits and requirements on our already overburdened systems and staff. Today's fiscal realities do not lend themselves to investing billions of more dollars in potentially unnecessary infrastructure upgrades for poorly defined outcomes and benefits to our receiving waters. Funding should be dedicated to replace and improve the sewers and treatment plants built under the Clean Water Act, and to maintain the significant gains in water quality made since the early 1970s.

We welcome this dialogue and we look forward to continuing to strengthen our partnership with New York State. We can no longer look to federal earmarks, robust construction grant programs, or even large pools of state funding to finance local water quality projects. Given this reality, we must also be able to meet our Clean Water Act requirements using new and innovative approaches to watershed management, on realistic time frames, with adequate rate support from those that we serve.

Sincerely,



Mark Koester, NYWEA President, on behalf of the Utility Executives from Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Albany, Westchester, Long Island and New York City and other small and large municipalities across New York State.