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columns

Visioning the Upper Delaware River Valley

A basin-wide collaboration

By CAROL R. COLLIER, Executive Director, Delaware River Basin Commission

The Upper Delaware region is critical to the whole Delaware River system because it holds the environmentally sensitive and hydrologically important headwaters. I believe that by being proactive, we can protect this resource and enhance our quality of life throughout the basin.

In doing so, we must respect a few basic truths which, borrowing from Thomas Jefferson, water managers hold to be self evident:

- Water does not respect political boundaries.
- What happens on the land affects the river.
- There is not enough water in the Delaware River Basin to support all uses during a drought of record.
- A floodplain is a natural extension of a river. It will flood. In addition to looking for upstream solutions, we need to keep people out of harm's way.
- The Delaware River system is sensitive and can change quickly. We need to base our decisions on the range of conditions, not averages.
- We do not know all the answers. A strong base of science is needed to support good decision making.
- Any river management plan must be flexible, so the parties can adapt as new scientific information and management alternatives become available.
- River management is not unilateral; it is a collaborative process.

With a resource as vast and interconnected as the Upper Delaware River Basin, this last point is especially important.

Land-use decisions are made at the local level. Therefore, the shape of our landscape is, first of all, the purview of municipalities. Municipalities need tools that allow them to set their own future, including ordinances that protect stream and river corridors and their floodplains, allow cluster development, encourage low-impact development and require stringent stormwater management of both water quantity and quality. Municipalities need funding to support stream restoration projects, flood mitigation and open-space protection. But there is also a need for

multi-municipal planning, especially when dealing with natural resource protection. This need is facilitated by county planning offices and the Upper Delaware Council (UDC).

Just as municipalities must work with each other, they, in turn, must be joined by the four states (New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware) and the government of New York City, all of which also make decisions that have impacts throughout the river basin.

The Delaware River Basin Commission (DRBC) is committed to working with all the parties to develop a long-term, flexible flow management plan that will provide better protection of the instream resources while protecting human needs. Specifically, DRBC is working through a number of its advisory committees to set the basin-wide strategy. Key areas include keeping the clean water clean through the DRBC's Special Waters Protection Program, flood mitigation planning, and developing the scientific basis for instream flow needs in both the non-tidal river and the estuary.

All these parties have committed to working out a long-term, flexible-flow management plan for the Delaware River. New York City, for example, is evaluating options for raising its dams that would allow for more water storage to support instream flows and/or more room for flood storage. Scientific studies are being prioritized and conducted to address upstream needs of the fishery and endangered mussels, as well as the impacts of changing fresh water flows to the estuary system.

In light of these collaborative efforts, my vision for the future of the basin is very positive. DRBC serves as a continuing forum in which all the parties involved can engage in critical discussions of the abovementioned issues. I hope you all want to participate in the process. Please check our website, DRBC.net, for more information.

The Delaware River system is the rope that binds the upper basin communities together, and it deserves to be protected and enhanced.

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