

Each issue, we ask members of the *On Tap* Editorial Advisory Board to answer a drinking water-related question. We then print as many responses as space permits. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of NESCA.



**The Center for Watershed Protection estimates that there are more than 4,000 watershed groups around the country. Advocates see the watershed approach as having numerous benefits and encourage water and wastewater personnel to work with them to protect water resources.**

**Q: Do drinking water professionals work with watershed groups in your area?**

**What do you see as being most beneficial about this approach?**



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#### **Put Assessment Into Action**

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency requires that states have source water assessments completed on all water supplies across the country. This effort is nearly done, primarily through the use of state revolving loan fund set-asides for this purpose and the good work of state rural water programs, state agencies, and other watershed groups. While the assessment work has nearly been completed, there still is a major lack of the purpose of all this work—implementation.

Initial funding to conduct the assessment is no longer available. Consequently, not much effort aimed at implementing the watershed protection plans has taken place. It's time to redirect our efforts and begin putting the plans to work to achieve the actual protection of the water supplies that is the heart of source water protection plans.





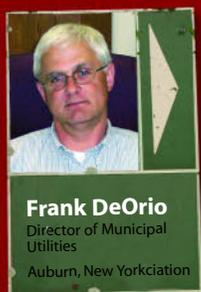
## State Legislation Spurs Action

In 1998, the Washington State legislature passed the Watershed Planning Act, which is overseen by the Department of Ecology (DoE). The purpose of this legislation was to establish a framework for developing local solutions to watershed issues. The state's commitment to the act can be seen in the funding provided—\$11 million in operating funds and \$12 million in capital funds—and in the growth of DoE from 12 to 42 full-time equivalent staff positions.

By the end of 2005, there were approximately 43 watershed planning units in various stages of completion that correspond to the 62 Water Resource Inventory Areas (WRIAs) in the state that follow geographic watershed boundaries, not governmental jurisdictional boundaries. These groups are comprised of various stakeholder interest groups, including local government officials (counties and cities); water utility representatives; Indian tribes; environmental groups; fisheries; and timber, agriculture, and other businesses. Stakeholders vary depending on local interests and issues in a particular WRIA.

The predominant driving factors behind the majority of participants in this effort are (1) support for the salmon and fisheries interests, (2) growth and development issues, and (3) associated water rights that watershed planning decisions can impact. For groundwater purveyors, I believe that the water rights issues are presently overshadowing the water quality issues. By contrast, those with a primary interest in fisheries are concerned about in-stream flows and water quality.

From the perspective of the utilities, the long-term benefits are to assure a sufficient quantity and quality of water supply to meet growth and less harm to the environment. We also hope it reduces the time and cost for the DoE to make water rights decisions.



## Working Together Is Key

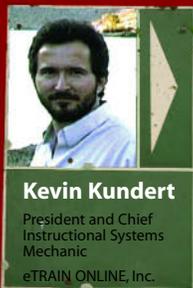
Whether it is surface or well water sources, those in charge of the water supply are often in charge of protecting the watershed. This can be a daunting task when left up to the utility. Ultimately, though, nothing is more beneficial for the protection of a water source and its watershed than to enlist the participation of stakeholders and drinking water professionals.

Watersheds come in all sizes and often cross political jurisdictions. To regulate their activities—whether it is land use, farming practices, or septic systems—is always a challenge. However, a common goal allows watershed groups and professional drinking water and wastewater people to come together with the unified purpose of resource protection and ideas about the best way to go about it.

The most beneficial aspect to this approach is that you bring together people with different, specific interests and concerns. We generally find that lakefront property owners are concerned about property values; town and village officials are concerned about assessments, taxes, and development; farmers are concerned about chemical use and soil erosion; and environmentalists are concerned about all of the above and more. Establishing meeting places, agendas, and active committees within the groups provides a much louder voice when dealing with regulating agencies and municipalities.

These various groups each can play an important role. The ability to dispel rumors, counteract undue concerns and provide knowledgeable personnel to answer questions from the public and disseminate correct information are some of the benefits available when working with these groups. We have also found the benefit of data management and information exchange to be a product of watershed group participation.

Watershed groups have demonstrated a willingness to participate in water quality education, information dissemination, and decision making. They realize that they have a direct stake in water quality concerns and should be a most welcomed resource for drinking water professionals. After all, don't we all live in a watershed?



## Operators Have a Role to Play

In Montana, there are numerous watershed groups. Occasionally, operators of larger systems share their knowledge of the water system and watershed in meetings and workshops. These watershed groups, in turn, share information to educate the public so informed decisions can be made on how to properly manage water resources.

New conflicts have arisen because of rapid growth in some of our towns and cities. Many of the folks attending meetings are landowners looking for assistance and possibly a source of funding for removal of contamination or for restoration projects. The effects of coalbed methane mining in this region are a big concern and there are also conflicts over open space versus development and the use of water for irrigation versus fishing. Any help that operators can provide would certainly be helpful.