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## Administration Supports Water Act Amendments

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# Administration Supports Water Act Amendments

## Three part strategy emphasizes technology, conservation and long term funding.

By Ronald H. Rosenberg

The *Federal Water Pollution Control Act* (FWPCA) is presently being amended by Congress with strong support from the Carter Administration. On June 30, 1977, Thomas C. Jorling, the recently appointed Assistant Administrator for Water and Hazardous Materials, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), testified before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works concerning the Administration's strategies. Jorling, former director of the Williams College Environmental Studies Program, presented ideas which could have significant impacts on the way planners view water pollution, urban growth policies and water conservation. In addition, strong support was expressed for the Section 208 area-wide planning process. Section 208 was described as the coordinating framework for planning, construction and regulation under the Act. Jorling's remarks indicated several important policy positions which may shape the federal, state and local water pollution control efforts in the future.

EPA will pursue a three part strategy. First, increased emphasis will be placed on establishing and implementing the best available technology controls for sources of toxic pollutants. Second, the agency will stress that water is a valuable, reusable resource which must be conserved. Third, the Administration will support long term funding for the municipal construction grants program at \$4.5 billion annually for ten years. However, the extended funding would be tied to other important modifications in the program.

**Scarce resource.** The new EPA strategy views the problem of improving water quality less as an effort to combat pollution but more as resource conservation. By eliminating the toxic components of the waste stream

through source controls or closed cycle processes, the wastewater reaching municipal treatment plants can be processed for a number of reuse options. Eventually, the components of wastewater will be considered to be important resources which must be recycled. This approach ends the notion that water is to be used as a disposal medium for domestic and industrial waste products. The desired end result would be a long term decline in all water consumption and treatment by attaining the Act's goal of zero discharge. By considering water a scarce

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resource and by designing public policy around that concept, ambient water quality would be improved.

**Eligibility restricted.** Jorling also described a number of legislative proposals affecting the Water Act that are of interest to planners. First, the Administration recommended that eligibilities for construction grants exclude collector sewers, separate storm sewers and some sewer rehabilitation. This amendment was based upon the concern of expanding federal expenditures. By limiting eligibilities, the long term federal commitment to water pollution control could be kept to the politically acceptable level of \$45 billion. Without such restrictions, the funding of all water pollution control needs were estimated to be in excess of \$200 billion. Beyond the fiscal reasons, the eligibility restrictions are intended to serve other goals.

EPA has been criticized for funding sewage collector systems because they tend to encourage environmentally damaging and energy inefficient sprawl development patterns. Finally, since the *Federal Water Pollution Control Act* is intended as an environmental protection statute rather than a public works or urban development law, federal funds should be spent to construct sewage treatment facilities to eliminate existing flows of water pollutants. Expenditures for collector

systems do not result in water quality improvement unless adequate treatment is provided.

All of these reasons are in accord with EPA's new administrative policy limiting the funding of collector systems. Should this legislative proposal be enacted, local governments anticipating significant growth would have to reconsider the spatial form of that growth and the method of financing the necessary public services.

**Long term funding.** Second, the EPA water administrator would limit the amount of sewage treatment reserve capacity to be funded by the 75% federal share under the Act. This proposed amendment would allow funding for reserve capacity to accommodate the sewage treatment needs of the local community for a period of up to ten years after construction of a sewage treatment plant. Such a proposal undoubtedly limits the overall costs of the grants program, but it also serves to eliminate the incentive for local governments to seek funding for treatment works far in excess of exist-

ing or anticipated needs. This overcapacity could induce growth in a manner which would be harmful to environmental quality.

Finally, Jorling proposed an amendment to encourage water conservation by industrial, commercial and domestic users. Under the bill, applicants for construction grants would receive only 70% of the costs of the treatment works if they could not demonstrate 15% reductions in water consumption. This proposal would employ the funding incentive to encourage the development of local regulatory, pricing or other measures needed to reduce water use. Recent water shortages throughout the country have highlighted the need for this approach to preservation of the water resource.

These proposals and others discussed by the new EPA Assistant Administrator indicate that the water pollution control effort begun by the 1972 Amendments to the *Federal Water Pollution Control Act* will continue into the next decade. However, EPA will be changing its emphasis to focus upon toxic pollutants, water recycling and reuse, and continued municipal waste treatment. As time passes, water resources will be recognized as vital to our standard of living and well being. These amendments will do much to speed that understanding. □

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