

Minority Report
Water Resources Board
Comment By RI Farm Bureau
RI Agricultural Council
Re: Water Allocation Program

The Rhode Island Farm Bureau commends the Water Resources Board for seeking input regarding a proposed Water Allocation Program for the State of Rhode Island. However, though well intended, the process being pursued by the Water Allocation Advisory Committee(s) is inherently flawed. In the past year, the Executive Director of RI Farm Bureau has participated in numerous meetings of sub-committees established by the Water Resources Board (WRB). It is estimated that the director spent over 150 hours attending meetings. Countless hours were spent reading the volumes of materials provided by each committee. While it is true that the WRB invited input from all types of organizations and businesses, it is virtually impossible for business people to put as much time into this project that is required if they are to have significant input into the process. As a result, the director of RI Farm Bureau found himself dwarfed by government employees. We suspect that the WRB will see more input from the public if they choose to make new rules or laws regarding the withdrawal of water.

Throughout this process, the RI Farm Bureau has yet to be convinced that we have a problem, let alone a serious one, with water allocation in this State. RI routinely gets over 40 inches of rain per year. Even during the drought of 2002, there was no serious water shortage. Farmers were for the most part able to water their crops and did so without assistance from the government (except for permits that we don't feel we should have to get to dig a pond on our own land.). While we agree that it is prudent to monitor stream flows and evaluate how water is allocated, we see no compelling evidence that a regulated water allocation system of any kind is needed. Furthermore we insist that rights to use water are property rights that cannot be taken away from a farmer or any landowner without just compensation and due process as guaranteed in the United States Constitution.

Lots of good ideas were generated throughout this process and it would be sensible for the State to pursue some of these ideas. The distribution and use of waste water looms large in most of the ideas generated at these meetings. To some degree, waste water is already being used, but all agree that we can do better in this area. Farmers certainly would have no problem using waste water on non-food crops as long as the use of that water is no more expensive than the water they are currently using. Cities and towns should revisit encouraging gray water requirements so that in the future we might be able to pipe waste water to homes for use in watering lawns and gardens and washing cars. Companies such as car washes should be offered incentives to recycle water. Most towns which instituted water rationing did so not because of the lack of water but the inability to treat enough water for safe use. A gray water system would go a long way in alleviating that shortage. In short, using waste water can go a long way toward conserving potable water.

The State needs to educate the public more about potential water shortages so that they can be avoided. A chart was shown at several meetings where stream flow was

down in direct proportion to development. Towns need to be aware of this for future planning. It is definitely the role of the State to educate the public about potential water shortages so that they can be avoided.

Incentives for conservation is another area that the State should explore. In the case of agriculture it is clear that drip irrigation uses less water than overhead sprinklers. While drip irrigation may not be practical all the time, most crops can use it. Rather than the State funding an expensive, regulated water allocation system, the funds would be better used offering incentives to conserve water, not only to farmers, but to all businesses and even private homeowners. Homeowners should be given incentives to convert from automatic timed lawn sprinklers to those that measure moisture in the soil.

Funding for incentives need not come from new sources of revenue or increased rates. As was brought out during these meetings, there is a lot of duplication of effort regarding water use. We have the Water Resources Board, Department of Environmental Management, the Coastal Resources Council, the Narragansett Bay Commission and numerous private organizations such as Save the Bay, the Environment Council and various watershed watch groups such as the Wood Pawcatuck Water Association.. Additionally, there are 31 water authorities in the State. Consolidation of many of these organizations could probably release millions of dollars for research and incentives.

Long before RI considers a mandatory, regulated water withdrawal program, steps should be taken to increase water supplies in deficient areas. RI Farm Bureau supports the construction of the Big River Reservoir. While it wasn't discussed much, desalinization is a process that needs to be looked at more in the Ocean State. In short, we believe RI has the wherewithal to never run out of water. The supply is almost infinite and renewable. Deficiency in delivery methods should not be confused with the availability of water.

Therefore, under no circumstances will the RI Farm Bureau support any kind of mandatory water withdrawal program that includes a mandatory registration program, suggests that farmer's water can be "taken" for any purpose without compensation or any program which charges farmers for using water that was previously not charged for.

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