

1996

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Recommended Citation

"1996 Maine Water Resources Conference Summary." *Maine Policy Review* 5.2 (1996) : 77 -78,
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News and Commentary

Maine Policy Review (1996). Volume 5, Number 2

1996 Maine Water Resources Conference Summary

Water management interests are solving local conflicts over water use, but unresolved problems still cost Maine's economy lost opportunities and threaten to get worse in some areas. That was the message speakers gave to the 1996 Maine Water Resources Conference May 10th in Lewiston.

The conference was organized to bring utility managers, citizens, state and federal representatives, and scientists together to discuss competing uses for rivers, lakes, and marine waters. Recent conflicts have occurred in Maine over withdrawals for cropland irrigation, access to ponds used for drinking water, fisheries restoration and measures to protect water quality.

Judy Hayes, president of Consumers Maine Water Company, opened the meeting with two rhetorical questions: "Who wants it and how do we use it?" As expected, the responses came from many quarters, and discussions proceeded with a "let's-get-on-with-it" tone. Some of the major points may be summarized as follows:

- **Share the flow.** Investments in hydropower, fisheries, municipal water supply, farm crops and recreation depend on allocations of properly timed water flows among many users.
- **Review and adjust the rules as needed.** Cases involving the Saco River, Casco Bay, wetlands and cropland irrigation demonstrate the importance of recognizing new interests as they emerge, removing unnecessary regulatory duplication and changing the boundaries of management areas to reflect new priorities.
- **Clean means green for Maine's economy.** Clean water leads to a bigger clam harvest, lower drinking water treatment costs, lower dredge spoil disposal costs and happy tourists, camp owners and anglers.
- **Keep it out of Augusta.** Solutions to conflicts are best determined locally among all relevant parties. The legislature should get involved only as a last resort and was described as a "dangerous arena for a water utility."

For the most part, as Charles Colgan of the University of Southern Maine's Muskie Institute for Public Policy pointed out in his overview of water use policy, these are not new lessons. Commissions and citizen groups have called for a coordinated state water management policy and an end to pollution for at least forty years. Solutions will continue to evolve toward collaborative, risk based decision-making among citizens and technical specialists.

As a check-up on progress in solving water use problems, the meeting offered a mixture of effective solutions and currently unsolved problems. As Maine's only river basin commission, the Saco River Corridor Commission offers both.

Since 1973, the commission has addressed riparian land use and water allocation issues among recreational, commercial and industrial users. However, as two audience members noted, the commission's funding mechanism may have become outdated and its mandate too narrow. Towns have withdrawn support or are threatening to do so, and the legislatively authorized boundary area gives the commission no authority to deal with issues at the watershed scale. One participant suggested that the commission's problems stem from a perception among its municipal members that it is a "liability without benefit."

Nevertheless, the need for a basin-wide organization to address flow allocation, recreation, and water quality was voiced by representatives of the Saco River Salmon Club, Central Maine Power, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and the Biddeford and Saco Water Company.

The difficulties in addressing watershed-scale issues were underscored by a discussion of Casco Bay. Reducing polluted runoff into the bay would increase clam harvests and reduce dredge spoil disposal costs, but the problems are either insidious and widespread or occurred long ago. In either instance, responsible parties and a reasonable allocation of remediation costs are difficult to specify. Thus, problems persist and economic losses mount as solutions take time to be developed.

Evidence for effective solutions to water use problems emerged during discussions of farm demand for irrigation water and protection for Lake Auburn. The Lake Auburn Watershed Protection Commission (established in 1993) and the Water Resource Committee (established in 1994) in Aroostook County provide a forum for potential competitors to work out mutually agreeable arrangements. Both of these groups have developed strategies to maintain economically important water uses and meet water quality regulations. It remains to be seen, however, whether the solutions will work as competition among water users increases.

Conflicts on Maine's Great Ponds were addressed by speakers from drinking water and recreation interests. Jet skis, fishing, drinking water quality, and land use issues are being addressed by a Great Pond Task Force appointed by the governor.

The conference was organized by a committee of public and private organizations and administered by the Water Research Institute at the University of Maine. The New England Section of the American Water Resources Association co-hosted a groundwater technical session during the conference. Individuals who want more information can contact Betty Lee of the Water Research Institute or Judy Hayes of Consumers Maine Water Company.

Full cite: Maine Policy Review. 1996. *News: 1996 Maine Water Resources Conference summary*. Vol. 5(2): 77- 78.