

Bay Journal distributes content to news organizations and not-for-profit publications in the Mid-Atlantic. It is free to use. Please include an author byline and credit the Bay Journal News Service. Learn more about our non-profit journalism at BayJournal.com

Distributed on 10/17/2017

Trump, Torpedoes and the Clean Water Act at 45

By Robert N. Whitescarver, Bay Journal News Service

The Clean Water Act is 45 years old this week, born in the U.S. Congress on October 18, 1972. Sometime before that day, the river of my childhood — the Roanoke River in southwestern Virginia — had been declared a fire hazard because of pollution.

I learned to waterski on that river, or rather on one of the manmade lakes along its winding path. It was 1965, and I remember one of those skiing lessons in particular. Dad was the spotter, and his friend George was the driver. I jumped in the water and waited for the handles of the ski rope. With the tips of my skis up and my butt down, I yelled, "forward!"

As the boat began pulling me forward, I saw banana peels and “floaters” — human waste — drifting past. I was ten years old, and it gave me the heebie-jeebies "Hit it!" I shouted, now doubly motivated to get up and out of the water.

America now has perhaps the best wastewater treatment in the world. All industries and municipalities that discharge pollution into U. S. waters must have permits to do so. They cannot exceed their allocation of pollution. It's regulation that works. It was not easy getting to this point. There was much gnashing of teeth, whining, litigation and political feuding, but now all “point” sources of pollution (i.e., coming out of a particular pipe or outfall) in this country are regulated. For good reason.

And now we've turned our attention to the far more complex problem of non-point pollution, that which finds its way into rivers and streams from virtually everywhere. It comes from stormwater runoff from roads, roofs, parking lots, over-fertilized lawns and golf courses, from pesticides, herbicides and malfunctioning septic fields, from bare ground, heavily fertilized crops, over-grazed pastures, livestock waste, and all sorts of other human and natural activities.

We've come a long way since the passage of the Clean Water Act. Before then we only occasionally worried about industrial pollution — and we never spoke of stormwater management, nutrient management, riparian buffers, livestock exclusion from streams, no-till farming, conservation easements, rain gardens, or any other best management practices that today add up to greatly improved water quality.

Before my first successful water ski on that polluted lake, there was no Chesapeake Bay Foundation (DOB 1967). There was no Earth Day or Environmental Protection Agency (founded

in April and December of 1970, respectively), and there were precious few scientists specializing in water quality or the effects of nutrient-choked water on aquatic plants and animals. The terms “non-point pollution” “watershed restoration,” “greenway”, and “blueway” had yet to enter the common vernacular.

The Clean Water Act gave us a roadmap for responsible land, and today our streams, rivers, lakes and estuaries are measurably cleaner than they were in the 1960s. This despite the fact that we’ve added over 100 million people to the U.S. population. The Chesapeake Watershed alone is home to more than 18 million people, and that number is expected to hit 20 million by 2030. Given those disadvantages, the progress is pretty impressive.

We’ve done this by using the law, sound science, strong partnerships, outdoor education, advocacy, litigation, and consequences for blatant polluters — all made possible by the Clean Water Act and driven by people and organizations that believe clean water is good for all.

We are moving forward for cleaner water, and we can celebrate major achievements — such as a freshwater stream once again supporting brook trout, or a wastewater treatment plant discharging water that’s cleaner than the stream it dumps into. The Chesapeake Bay, America’s largest estuary, had no dead zones last year — for the first time since the sixties.

Think of all the cities and towns that now have walkways along their rivers because of cleaner water. In Virginia alone we have Alexandria, Richmond, Strasburg, Lexington, Luray, Waynesboro and many more. Think of all the jobs created by our desire for cleaner water: nurseries growing native plants and trees for stream buffers, for example, or contractors hired to build fences to keep cows out of streams. One company in Waynesboro, Conservation Services, supplies the entire North American continent with trees and tree shelters for shade and buffers.

The benefits of clean water are immeasurable: more recreation, more seafood, healthier humans, healthier livestock and a stronger economy. As they say, a high tide raises all ships.

But there are now torpedoes of ignorance, greed and science denial in the water — launched by the Trump administration, and aimed at the fundamental environmental laws that have gotten us so far. I gnash my teeth. They want to “water down” the definition of “Waters of the United States” so that polluters can get away with it and thereby increase their profit margins. They want to zero out funding for the Chesapeake Bay and for clean water initiatives everywhere. They seek to discredit scientists and hide or destroy their research.

I say damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead. We — every last one of us — need to tell our representatives in Washington that clean water is vital to our future as a country and a species, and that they must continue to fully fund clean water initiatives.

We simply cannot afford to weaken the Clean Water Act; we cannot afford to go back to the filthy waters of the 1960s.

*Robert Whitescarver is an agronomist and certified nutrient management planner in Virginia.
His views do not necessarily reflect those of the Bay Journal.*

Distributed by the Bay Journal News Service

To unsubscribe, send reply to newservice@bayjournal.com with "unsubscribe" in the subject line.

Bayjournal.com

Contact:

T. F. Sayles
Managing Editor, BJNS
Bay Journal News Service
410-746-0519
tsayles@bayjournal.com