

Raritan Water Region Restoration, Protection and Enhancement Workshop

The Raritan River Water Region is one of five water regions that comprise New Jersey's twenty watershed management areas. The Raritan Water Region includes 4 of the 20 Watershed Management Areas (WMA 7, 8, 9 and 10) and will be the focus region highlighted in the forthcoming Integrated Water Quality Assessment Report being prepared by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

Purpose of Workshop: Develop a prioritization process and strategy for restoration, protection and enhancement of waterbodies in the Raritan Water Region (RWR) to inform the Integrated Water Quality Assessment Report (Integrated Report). The Integrated Report, required under Sections 303(d) and 305(b) of the Federal Clean Water Act, is submitted every two years to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and assesses the state's water quality with a focus on one of the water regions every cycle.

The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (Department) recognizes that there is not a "one size fits all" approach to restoring and protecting water resources. Recently the state completed a total maximum daily load (TMDL) for impaired waters to address nutrient impairment in the RWR, which identified point and nonpoint source (NPS) reductions required to attain surface water quality standards (SWQS). While point sources will be addressed through the state's permitting requirements, efficiencies in managing NPS may be best tackled through partnerships to implement specific actions. The identification of these actions was the subject of a June Raritan River Watershed stakeholder meeting from which the resulting follow-up topics emerged: impervious surfaces; riparian protection and restoration; and green infrastructure projects - how many and what kind.

New Jersey Vision

Acknowledging that TMDLs are not the only appropriate response to address identified impairments, in December 2013, EPA issued new guidance entitled, *A Long-Term Vision for Assessment, Restoration, and Protection under the Clean Water Act Section 303(d) Program*, which articulates that, "The Clean Water Act Section 303(d) Program provides for effective integration of implementation efforts to restore and protect the nation's aquatic resources, where the nation's waters are assessed, restoration and protection objectives are systematically prioritized, and Total Maximum Daily Loads and alternative approaches are adaptively implemented to achieve water quality goals with the collaboration of States, Federal agencies, tribes, stakeholders, and the public". The Vision guidance was in response to feedback and input from states that TMDLs alone were not the sole means to attain water quality standards. The approach laid forth below is New Jersey's Vision to identify and prioritize waterbodies for restoration and protection consistent with the new federal guidance using the Raritan Water Region as a precedence.

Selecting Priority Areas

The Vision guidance recommends that each state identify priority waters for TMDL development, restoration and/or protection plans by 2016, with the goal of completing those plans by 2022. In

support of developing a Vision for New Jersey for the RWR, an informal Raritan Water Region Stakeholder meeting was held in June 2016 to: 1) discuss surface water quality in the Raritan Water Region; 2) solicit stakeholder input on issues of concern and their causes; 3) inventory actions already underway; 4) discuss strategies to improve surface water quality; and 5) seek recommendations on goals and strategies for water quality restoration. Highlights from the stakeholder meeting included the need to place an emphasis on capturing stormwater runoff from existing development and desire for impervious cover reduction and additional buffers along streambanks. Initial thoughts on priority areas for restoration centered around farms, road salt reduction, and dam removals. Programs working really well included River Friendly education programs, Rutgers Impervious Cover projects, rain gardens and/other green infrastructure, and wetlands reserve programs. Reduction in pesticide use and better protection of existing buffers were also identified as goals.

Raritan Water Region Prioritization Strategy

The strategy to develop priorities for restoration, enhancement and protection will be based on the assemblage of the following information into a geospatial coverage. This three step process will:

- 1) Identify which assessment units (AUs) should be the focus of our collective efforts starting with:
 - HUC 14 waterbodies on the bubble/edge – barely impaired waterbodies with a high likelihood of success of being restored to attain SWQS
- 2) Narrow focus on specific AUs to be targeted through information overlays of the following:
 - Terrain, soil, land cover/land use and vegetation all contribute to water quality issues
 - 5R (NPS impaired) Waterbodies
 - 319(h) NPS Grant Funded BMPs
 - NJ Water Supply Authority Projects
 - TMDL Coverage
- 3) Determine which mitigation/restoration efforts should be implemented in a given AU to achieve the best outcome
 - Reduction of impervious surfaces
 - Riparian restoration
 - Riparian conservation/protection
 - Green infrastructure projects
 - Etc.

Role of the Stakeholder

Stakeholder participation is critical to the Department's efforts to prioritize waterbodies for restoration and protection and to implement plans for improvements. Stakeholders will review existing information presented above in the context of where we should focus our collective efforts to prioritize waterbodies that are amenable to water quality improvement in the near term. Stakeholders will contribute local perspective and information on AUs they are most familiar with, they will weigh in on potential strategies for improving SWQ, help set overall priorities for the region,

as well as contribute to implementation of identified priorities and measures by identifying those AUs and projects they could assist with.

Outcome

The outcome of the stakeholder process will be a prioritization of waterbodies and recommended BMPs that will be the basis for restoration, enhancement and protection projects for the Raritan Water Region that are expected to improve and, where appropriate, maintain water quality. The Department will prioritize these projects for funding and encourages stakeholder groups to target their work in support of this strategy.