

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It would be safe to say that today before this conversation, none of us today thought about the water.

—Charlie, Charlottesville

I live within less than a half a mile of the Susquehanna River. I've lived here all my life and I've seen streams that were behind my house. And there was one that in a sense, disappeared, and the reason that they're gone is because of the mining. Because of the housing and all that kind of stuff. In Susquehanna County the streams haven't changed too much in the last 30 years. That's because they haven't had the influx of the people coming into the city, building houses, and so on.

—John, Wilkes-Barre

Eight focus groups were conducted with voters who follow the news, from Albemarle and Orange County VA, and from the cities and surrounding areas of Harrisburg, Wilkes-Barre and Lancaster PA. Detail on the 72 participants is attached to this report.

These respondents are men and women, Republican, Democrat and Independent, who respond uniformly and with conviction to the question “Why is our water important?” Water is precious, and essential for life. They believe its condition is threatened, and there may be serious consequences for the economy and for human health. They further agree, across political differences, that government has an obligation to ensure access to safe water, and to prevent its degradation.

The research was conducted on behalf of organizations seeking passage of the 2010 Chesapeake Clean Water Act, to discover what communications approaches can mobilize support and neutralize opposition. However, the findings also hold key insights for any advocacy work to protect and restore surface waters, at the local as well as regional levels. Key findings include:

Most people do not think in terms of a “watershed”, and most do not know what a watershed is. They know that the streams and rivers get dirtier as they move from mountains or springs toward the ocean, but do not assume that conditions in the Chesapeake Bay are necessarily the result of decisions made upstream.

The effect of water pollution on human health is a significant concern, and respondents believe health is threatened by current conditions. They further believe that concerns about future scarcity of potable water are not unfounded, and find it plausible that water will become a more and more contested and precious resource.

Development and changes in the landscape are understood to affect water quality, but as an episodic problem, rather than a continuous and cumulative one. Respondents can explain how, when trees are cut down and open land is paved, it affects the river. But they don't know and never think about what happens to the rain when it falls on their property and community.

Respondents express a desire for knowledge – about the actual condition of local waters, and about solutions to prevent future degradation of the water. They are very responsive to the concept of buffers (a word unknown to almost all) and to the idea that everyone, from individual homeowners to builders, industry and farmers, can take practical steps to protect the waters.

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We use well water now, and our well water is tested twice a year because we have a chicken house and it has to be tested for them. There are a lot of uses for water, and now they're using for the golf courses and stuff like that.

Farming, you will not find them using too much water because of the Chesapeake Bay. They're really pushing to push the farmers out of Lancaster County. They're blaming us for the pollution runoff and everything like that, but if they would go to the homeowners and look how many chemicals they put on their lawns, I think they'd be singing a different story.

— Chris H., Lancaster

They believe “the farmer” is unfairly blamed for water pollution, but recognize that agriculture is more concentrated than in past generations, and that issues of scale create new problems for maintaining water quality.

If the issue is framed in terms of government regulation, it immediately raises doubt about the effectiveness and fairness of “government” in the abstract. However, respondents believe that the water belongs to everyone; that everyone is responsible for maintaining water quality; and that government is a necessary instrument to enable individuals, businesses and communities to fulfill that responsibility, and to take action when someone evades or disregards it.

Recommendations for talking about passage of 2010 Chesapeake Clean Water Act include the following:

Continue with and strengthen local base, for local choices affecting local waterways. Do not use the concept of a “watershed” to explain the issue.

Emphasize drinking water and human health impacts of continuing degradation, including costs of water treatment.

Be explicit about the need to secure our farms, and the opportunity and ability of farmers to maintain our shared water and soil resources. Provide specific, graphic information about issues and consequences of scale, but do not make agriculture the center piece of the need for the bill.

Describe the problem, to be solved by the bill, as run-off carrying pollution into the water: run-off from cities and towns, and from individual properties: malls, industrial parks, highways, farms.

Be explicit about the role of Federal government, to provide resources, ensure fairness and consistency, and hold accountable those who evade their responsibility. Be explicit about the shared role of everyone in the community, to protect the resource and to make conscious choices to do so.