

Enjoy your drink of water

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The next time you drink a glass of water, think about all that has been done to keep that water clean. Water is the key to life. Are you doing anything to ensure that your children and grandchildren have that same opportunity?

Prior to 1972, we assumed that nature would continue to bless us with good water. Unfortunately, chemical dumping and raw sewage overwhelmed the Lake Erie ecosystem and the Lake Erie was declared dead. Thankfully Congress stepped forward in the 1970s and began enacting environmental laws to protect of water, air, and soil. The Clean Water Act now prevents such uncontrolled discharges of contamination into our water.

In recent years, we have seen a resurgence of interest in protecting the Great Lakes, the world's largest supply of fresh water. The Great Lakes states and Canadian provinces recently signed a compact which was subsequently solidified with U.S. and Canadian legislation to severely limit removal of the water for commercial purposes. In that agreement the states stressed the significance of our fresh water resource as important to life, health, economic stability, and business. The New York Ocean and

Great Lakes Ecosystem Conservation Council Act was enacted to oversee protection of this great asset for future generations. It states: "New York's coastal ecosystems are critical to the state's environmental and economic security, and integral to the state's high quality of life and culture. Healthy coastal ecosystems are part of the state's legacy, and are necessary to support the state's human and wildlife population." (Section 14-0103 N.Y. Environmental Conservation Law.)

Will we still have fresh drinkable water for our grandchildren? It really depends on how well we protect the watershed of the Great Lakes. A watershed can be defined as the area of land that drains to a particular body of water. When rain falls on this area it either flows along the surface of the ground towards a body of water or is absorbed into the soil and eventually finds its way to that body of water.

Everything on the surface of the earth eventually drains into a body of water; "we drink what others dump." Today, a major area of concern is persistent toxic wastes. These are wastes that do not breakdown in water and will continue to pose the same threat years from now. In 1977, the EPA banned the production of PCBs in the United States because they are very toxic and do not break down over

time. Unfortunately we must now live with fishing advisories because PCBs have made their way from leaking toxic landfills into our fish.

Surprisingly, our biggest threat to our precious fresh drinking water is government. Our environmental laws tightly control toxic wastes and sewage through a government permit system. Unfortunately, this system is reliant upon governmental units making good decisions in the granting or denying of environmental permits. While the U.S. government and the Great Lakes states and Canada have made great progress in recognizing the need to protect the Great Lakes, governmental agencies and local decision makers have failed. What else could explain why decision makers continue to grant permits to landfill PCBs and other toxic wastes a short distance from the Niagara River and Lake Ontario. Why does the New York Department of Environmental Conservation still continue to plan for more toxic waste landfills for this same area? Did they fail to understand what a watershed is?

But the blame must be spread to others as well. Recently the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers disbanded its Restoration Advisory Board, local citizen experts who continued to challenge bad decision-making by the Corps. Why else would the world's

largest supply of K-65 uranium still be sitting in a basement with a clay cap, one that is now years beyond its intended life cycle? I recently attended a hearing on West Valley (south of Buffalo). This was the site of a failed nuclear reactor core reprocessing plant. Nuclear waste was transported to this site, which is near Lake Erie, to be reprocessed.

Now this problem rests with state and federal government, neither of which is willing to take responsibility to protect the local citizens or Lakes Erie and Ontario from the radioactive leaking that continues to occur there. At a recent hearing, the government disclosed its proposal to dismantle some buildings and keep all of the radioactive waste there for another 30 years while it explores what to do next.

The Niagara Watershed Alliance is committed to exposing these bad decisions and to educating the public on the need to protect our watershed for our health, life, and economic prosperity. We urge everyone to accept the stewardship of the environment by being proactive in insuring that the government always makes the right decision. Let us not fail to protect our water, the source of our lives, for future generations.

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