Congress stalls on water, but EPA can lead

A time to restore protections for our water

For more than a year, big polluters and their cronies in Congress have blocked legislation to restore the Clean Water Act. With action at a standstill on Capitol Hill, Environment Massachusetts is pushing the Environmental Protection Agency to step in and restore full protections to the streams and wetlands that feed Massachusetts’ rivers and lakes.

Recent Supreme Court decisions have weakened the Clean Water Act and called into question whether more than half of Massachusetts’ streams, including waters upstream that feed our rivers like the Charles and drinking water sources like the Quabbin Reservoir, are even protected. Without these safeguards, polluters can dump waste with impunity. Ultimately, our rivers and lakes pay the price.

And it’s a price Massachusetts’ rivers can ill afford to pay—our waters already suffer from excess pollution. According to a report we released with our allies last summer, polluters dumped more than 1 million gallons of toxic waste into Massachusetts’ rivers in 2008. Contaminated water can make swimmers and people who drink it vulnerable to a host of waterborne illnesses, including stomach flu, skin rashes, hepatitis, neurological disorders and other serious health problems.

Support for Massachusetts’ rivers

As the health of our rivers continues to worsen, plagued by stormwater runoff and other industrial pollution, it’s more important than ever that our leaders in Washington, D.C., and Boston find a way to rise above the fray and restore the Clean Water Act. But with no congressional action in sight, our staff and members are pushing the EPA to get involved.

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson is currently considering a new clean water initiative, saying that the EPA would “consider administrative action to restore the Clean Water Act protections to wetlands and headwater streams that provide clean water for human and ecological uses.”

But with the new Republican majority in Congress itching to hamstring the EPA, and well-connected polluters lobbying against strong protections, the EPA needs all the public support we can muster. We’ve banded together with our sister groups across the country to rally thousands of people nationwide to send the EPA a message: Americans want strong protections for our waters.

more online

Read our newsletter online at: www.EnvironmentMassachusetts.org/newsletters/winter11

Winter Report | 2011
To our members

Once again, the political winds have shifted. Yet when it comes to Massachusetts’ environment, the challenges and opportunities we face remain the same. And luckily, our Statehouse is still full of decision-makers willing to stand up for the environment.

This year, we prevented Congress from rolling back our progress on clean cars, but we need to push more. We advocated for better protection for our drinking water sources, and Gov. Deval Patrick’s administration responded. We have tremendous potential to harness the wind that blows on the ocean out past our beaches and the sun that shines on our rooftops, yet the policies that can make it happen are being challenged.

Regardless of who’s up and who’s down in Boston and Washington, we have our work cut out for us. Thanks to your support, we’re ready to meet the challenge.

Sincerely,

Ben Wright
Advocate

Recent action

Solar on the rise in Massachusetts

The solar industry is growing. According to a report by the Solar Foundation and Green LMI Consulting, the industry employs roughly 93,000 workers across the country.

Employment figures for solar power have nearly doubled in the last year, and are expected to grow another 26 percent in the coming 12 months—at a time when overall job growth is only expected to grow 2 percent.

As many companies and whole sectors are slowing down, state policies and small-business leaders are boosting the economy while building Massachusetts’ clean energy future.

Keeping the pressure on for the Quabbin

As of this writing, the Patrick administration is still considering Environment Massachusetts’ and other environmental groups’ call to declare the Quabbin Reservoir permanently off-limits to logging.

While we are disappointed that the administration has taken so long to propose a policy that would adequately protect the largest source of drinking water in Massachusetts—or at least develop a plan to enforce regulations already in place—we are confident that Gov. Patrick and his staff will ultimately take the necessary steps to protect the Quabbin by banning clear cutting and stepping up enforcement so any logging that does occur is appropriately scrutinized.

*Note: In our fall newsletter, we reported that 60 percent of Massachusetts’ forests are now protected from clear-cutting. The correct fact is that 60 percent of forests managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation are protected—not 60 percent of all forests in the Commonwealth. Thanks to the forest activists who alerted us.

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Environment Massachusetts has begun a productive year at the Statehouse, defining and planning our priorities for the 2011-2012 legislative session. We’ll keep working to identify the most pressing problems that our environment faces, and then crafting and advocating legislation that will address these problems—and maintain Massachusetts’ position as one of the most pro-environment states in the country.

Nearly a quarter of our state representatives and senators are new, and many of them have a promising history of fighting for the environment in their local communities. Read on for a brief summary of the issues we’ll be working with them on in the coming year, and check our website in early February for a complete legislative agenda.

Protecting our rivers
We will support legislation that addresses water shortages that many parts of the state are facing, particularly on the North Shore. Massachusetts can use water much more efficiently, and we will work to introduce legislation that reduces overall water consumption in the Commonwealth. And to address quality problems as well as quantity, we’ll work in the coming year to develop long-term solutions to sewage and runoff pollution, so Massachusetts rivers are healthy and swimmable.

The environmental budget
The Patrick administration has asked us to expect cuts to our environmental agencies by about 8 percent. We’ll be working to stand up for meaningful and important programs that might be on the chopping block: We all use our parks and open spaces, and rely on park rangers to maintain trails and keep the parks safe; the Department of Environmental Protection plays a key role in enforcing state environmental protections and keeping an eye on our drinking water and air quality.

Clean energy
We’ll be supporting legislation this year to make it easier for homeowners and businesses to use solar power. Right now, the upfront costs for solar can seem prohibitive, but there are simple ways to make it affordable.

We’ll also continue the fight to make it easier to site wind turbines on land in Massachusetts. Last year, our progress was tied up at the last minute of the legislative session, but with a coalition already built and the governor’s commitment to the bill, we’re convinced that this is the year for finally clearing the hurdles that prevent communities from building wind farms.

There are two big problems with the way we use energy in Massachusetts: Too much of our energy comes from dirty and dangerous sources, and we just use too much of it. We’ll be working to pass strong laws to make our buildings use energy better, reduce energy costs for Bay Staters and reduce air pollution from coal-fired power plants.

How many pies can you buy at 60 mpg?

With the Obama administration considering a new round of fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks as millions of us took to the road last Thanksgiving, Alex Wall, an associate with Environment Massachusetts’ Washington, D.C., office, got to wondering: How much money would Americans save if we drove ultra-efficient cars that traveled 60 miles per gallon, instead of the current 26.4 mpg average?

After crunching the numbers, Alex came up with an answer: A cool $234 million. That’s enough money to put another few million pumpkin pies on holiday tables.

And that’s just one more reason—along with our desire to help get Massachusetts off oil and reduce our state’s carbon footprint—that Environment Massachusetts is joining the members of our national federation and nine governors in calling for new government rules that will ensure that the average car sold in the U.S. will go 60 miles per gallon by 2025.

After 14 states decided to adopt Clean Car standards over the last decade, the Obama administration raised current standards to 33 miles per gallon by 2016. Now it’s time to take the next step.
None of us want to see another oil spill. But wouldn’t drilling for oil generate more income than our beaches ever could?

It turns out, the reverse is true. According to our research, clean beaches inject $4 into the economy for every $1 that could be earned from offshore drilling. “Our research makes it clear that clean beaches and oceans are worth much more than drilling for the last drops of oil off our coasts,” said Federal Oceans Advocate Mike Gravitz.

Gravitz has testified before the president’s Oil Spill Commission three times, urging them to abandon plans to expand offshore drilling up the Atlantic coast. And thanks to our Gumbo for the Gulf fundraisers, he was able to fly four Gulf business-owners and one fisherman to Washington to lobby decision-makers against new drilling. We won a big victory in December when the Obama administration announced it would not allow drilling off the Atlantic coast for at least the next five years.