

Drinking Water for 565,000 in Northeastern Pennsylvania at Risk Congress Must Restore Clean Water Act Protections

October 6, 2009 -- Analysis by the Environmental Protection Agency shows that drinking water supplies for at least 565,000 residents in Northeastern Pennsylvania are at risk of contamination from industrial pollution – and federal agencies like EPA may not have authority to stop it.

The goal of the landmark Clean Water Act, signed into law in 1972, was to “restore the physical, chemical, and biological integrity of the nation’s waters.” However, two recent Supreme Court decisions threaten to dramatically narrow the scope of the Clean Water Act by excluding non-navigable bodies of water such as small streams.

Small streams are essential sources of drinking water, supplying water for public systems across the country. The Environmental Protection Agency analyzed streams nationwide to pinpoint which ones fed public water supplies. The results: More than 117 million Americans get their drinking water from sources that may lose federal protection from pollution, including residents of

- Lackawanna County (150,225 people)
- Luzerne County (235,609 people)
- Lycoming County (60,025 people)
- Montour County (4,897 people)
- Northumberland County (84,421 people)
- Snyder County (5,856 people)
- Susquehanna County (8,399 people)
- Tioga County (12,473 people)
- Union County (3,725 people)

EPA did not report data for other counties in the region – including Bradford, Pike, Sullivan, Wayne, and Wyoming – because the agency could not determine conclusively that streams feed public systems in these counties. However, EPA reports that these counties may receive drinking water from public systems located in other counties affected by stream health.

Conservation and sportsmen’s groups are urging Congress to protect people and wildlife that depend on these at-risk waters. “By acting on legislation this fall,” says Geoff Mullins, Policy Initiatives Manager for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, “the U.S. House of Representatives can take a major step forward to ensure our water is safe for drinking, fishing, and outdoor recreation.”

“Restoring Clean Water Act protections isn’t just important for waterfowl and wildlife – it’s important to the families that are affected by polluted waters and need guarantees that their health won’t be in jeopardy because of unprotected water sources,” says Jan Goldman-Carter, Wetlands and Water Resources Counsel for the National Wildlife Federation. Dr. Scott Yaich, Director of Conservation Operations for Ducks Unlimited, concurs: “Guaranteeing protection for streams and wetlands under the Clean Water Act benefits everyone – from the families that drink the water to the waterfowl and wildlife that live it”

“Headwater streams, especially the intermittent and ephemeral streams that are dry for parts of the year, are the ‘Rodney Dangerfields’ of the water resource world: They don’t get enough respect,” says Steve Moyer, Vice President for Government Affairs for Trout

Unlimited. “Yet the best science we have tells us how extremely valuable headwater streams are for drinking water, water quality, and fish and wildlife habitat. If the Clean Water Act’s visionary goals are ever to be achieved, Congress must restore protection for these critical resources.”

“We simply want to confirm the original intent of the Clean Water Act to protect the waterways that Americans use for drinking, swimming, and outdoor recreation,” concludes Scott Kovarovics, Conservation Director for the Izaak Walton League of America. “Only Congress can amend the Clean Water Act to guarantee it protects streams that provide drinking water for more than 117 million Americans.”

For more information, please contact Scott Kovarovics, Izaak Walton League of America (301-548-0150 x 223), or Jan Goldman-Carter, National Wildlife Federation (202-797-6894).

###

Ducks Unlimited (www.ducks.org)
Izaak Walton League of America (www.iwla.org)
National Wildlife Federation (www.nwf.org)
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (www.trcp.org)
Trout Unlimited (www.tu.org)

Background

Americans get their drinking water from a variety of sources, including residential and community wells, rivers and lakes, and reservoirs. Streams, runoff, and other surface waters flow into many of these sources. In July, the Environmental Protection Agency updated previous analysis of the number of people who receive drinking water from public systems that are fed in whole or in part by intermittent, ephemeral, and headwater streams, many of which do not flow continuously year-round. The agency concluded that more than 207,000 miles of these streams flow into public systems supplying water to more than 117 million Americans.

In spite of the importance of these streams for drinking water, recreation, and fish and wildlife, recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions indicate that many may not be covered by the Clean Water Act. It is essential for Congress to pass legislation that will ensure these streams and other waters are clearly protected by America’s most important clean water law.