EPA Assesses U.S. Watersheds; Gives Citizens Access to National and Local Water Quality Data

[EPA press release - October 2, 1997]

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency--as part of its public right-to-know initiatives--today released its first comprehensive assessment of U.S. watersheds. The data, now available to all citizens on the Internet, indicate that: 16 percent of watersheds have good water quality; 36 percent have moderate water quality; 21 percent have more serious problems; and sufficient data are lacking to fully characterize the remaining 27 percent. The agency cautioned that one in 14 watersheds in all areas are vulnerable to further degradation from pollution, primarily from urban and rural runoff.

"The Clinton Administration believes that one of the most effective ways to solve environmental problems is to put information about pollution into the hands of citizens," said EPA Administrator Carol M. Browner. "We also believe that the best way to achieve cleaner water is to protect the more than 2,000 watersheds in this country.

"Providing the public with this information on pollution in their local watersheds is an extremely important step in improving our nation's water quality and protecting the health of the American public," Browner said.

The watershed data indicate that polluted runoff from urban and rural areas is a major contributor of water quality problems and threatens water quality in healthy watersheds, as well. Since the Clean Water Act was enacted in October 1972, controls on discharges from factories and sewage treatment plants have been responsible for many water quality improvements and are widely controlled when viewed nationally. In some local area, however, such point-source pollution remains a problem.

EPA and the states have responded to the remaining water quality problems by developing a watershed approach to protecting and restoring clean water. The watershed approach gives EPA, state regulators, and local citizens a better view of local pollution problems and the flexibility to tailor their remedies to address specific local conditions, such as runoff. While the Clean Water Act does not give EPA specific authority to regulate rural runoff, over the years, EPA has provided more than $570 million and technical assistance to encourage states to develop runoff control programs. EPA and the states currently regulate and are expanding controls on urban storm water runoff. Under the new Safe Drinking Water Act, signed by President Clinton on August 6, 1996, EPA has taken the first-ever steps to protect against contamination of sources for drinking water. In addition, EPA has a major initiative underway to help states restore impaired waterways by strengthening water quality criteria and setting maximum pollutant levels.

The index includes both historical and recent wetland losses. While wetland loss has slowed in recent years, over time more than half of these valuable resources have been lost in the lower 48 states.
EPA categorized 2,111 watersheds in the continental United States by combining nationally available data and evaluating it watershed-by-watershed. Alaska and Hawaii are not included in today's survey; EPA expects to add them later. A watershed is generally defined as a water drainage area, or land areas bounded by ridges that catch rain and snow and drain to rivers, lakes and groundwater within the drainage area.

Because waters within a watershed often intermingle, activities and pollution in one part of a watershed are likely to affect another part of the same watershed. For example, the health of rivers and other surface waters can also affect drinking water sources, including groundwater; surface water health can also affect aquatic life, including fish and shellfish; and their water quality can impact economic and recreational opportunities within the same watershed.

EPA made the watershed assessments by combining into one index 15 individual databases available today from many public and private sources. The 15 individual databases are "indicators" used to assess and score the watersheds, for both condition (quality) and vulnerability to degradation from pollution. The databases also can be generated on the Internet in the form of national and local maps.

The first seven indicators are used to characterize watershed conditions: Rivers; Fish and Wildlife Consumption Advisories; Drinking Water Sources; Contaminated Sediments; Ambient Water Quality using Four Toxic Pollutants; Ambient Water Quality using Four Conventional Pollutants; Wetlands Loss.

The next eight indicators are used to assess vulnerability: Aquatic/Wetland Species at Risk; Pollutant Loads above Permitted Limits for Toxic Pollutants; Pollutant Loads above Permitted Limits for Conventional Pollutants; Urban Runoff Potential; Agricultural Runoff Potential; Population Change; Hydrologic Modifications from Dams; and Estuarine Pollution Susceptibility.

The public also will be able to retrieve, in addition to the above information, the overall score for a watershed, reflecting condition and vulnerability; additional information provided by states; and links to public and volunteer organizations working to protect and restore water at the regional, state and watershed level.

The watershed database, called the "Index of Watershed Indicators" is available on the Internet at: http://www.epa.gov/iwi/. Additional instructions and hard copy is available from: National Center for Environmental Publications and Information, P.O. Box 42419, Cincinnati, Ohio 45242-2419; phone: 513-489-8190; fax: 513-489-8695. The "Index of Watershed Indicators" publication number is: EPA-841-R-97-010.