

Lurching Toward Trouble

The Virginia Coastal Plain needs a comprehensive water supply plan--Now!

The recent federal court decision that invalidated the Army Corps of Engineers permit for the 1,500-acre King William reservoir is the latest example of the poor state of water-supply planning and management within the Virginia Coastal Plain (see: www.bayjournal.com). U. S. District Court Judge Henry Kennedy, Jr. agreed with a coalition of environmentalists and Native Americans who charged that the reservoir would harm wetlands and other aquatic resources and inundate numerous archaeological sites. Regardless of the merits of the project or the objections to it, the decision has left unanswered the question: Where is the Lower Peninsula going to get the 26 million gallons of water each day that the reservoir would have supplied if it had been constructed?

Today, the Hampton Roads region uses 90 million gallons of water per day; approximately 20 mgd are withdrawn from groundwater. Although estimates of future water use come with considerable uncertainty, we can be sure that water use will continue to grow at a steady rate. Additionally, many freshwater sources in the vicinity are already "maxed out," requiring officials to shift their sights to other water sources. The easy target is the vast supply of groundwater that underlies the Virginia Coastal Plain.

Unfortunately, this resource is already showing signs of stress. Artesian water levels exhibit a persistent and long-term decline and are approaching critical levels at some localities. Deep cones of depression have developed at centers of large-scale groundwater withdrawals. It's not unrealistic to state that at some time within the next few decades the groundwater supply, too, might be "maxed out." Now is the time to abandon a "one source fits all" approach and develop a water-supply plan for the Virginia Coastal Plain centered on a truly diversified system of water sources. If the water needs of the Virginia Coastal Plain are to be met in a manner that conserves the region's resources, then the future water supply of the Virginia Coastal Plain will have to consist of many sources, including surface water, groundwater, desalination, water reuse and others, and must feature effective water conservation.

I'm sure that the opponents of the King William reservoir are flush with their victory, but I would feel better if they would now turn their efforts to supporting a diversified water-supply program that features the safe development of many types of water sources integrated into an efficient and economical system.

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