

## **Can Public Drinking Water Coalitions Make A Difference?**

**Jim Clark, Penn State Extension Educator, in consultation with Julie Kollar, WREN Project Director**



**(Caption: Jim Clark and Julie Kollar present at a Source Water Protection meeting in Brockway, PA)**

Rural Public Water Supplies face many problems and it has been my experience that solutions are always better, the more people you involve in their creation. Typically in PA, rural public water supplies operate independently, managing their own individual systems, and come together only periodically for trade association meetings, trainings, etc. Rural water systems do not typically even connect with nearby water systems that share their watershed upstream or downstream, or with watershed groups that may be working on restoration efforts in their source water areas, or with county planners, etc., but that is beginning to change in PA.

The Triple Divide Watershed Coalition centered in Potter County, PA, has proven that public water supply coalitions can be beneficial in many ways, including:

- securing grant funds
- identifying efficiencies in operations
- achieving savings through joint purchasing
- internal training of operators and building resiliency within the public water systems
- increasing political influence, and
- expanding and sharing outreach and educational ideas for customers and the general public.

So the answer is yes, Public Water Supply Coalitions can, and are making a world of difference.

A case in point. The Triple Divide Watershed Coalition (TDWC) is made up of all 9 public water systems in Potter County along with a few in McKean County. They each have a PA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) approved Source Water Protection Plan. Obtaining a Source Water Protection Plan for each water system is the place to start. The purpose of a Source Water Protection Plan is to develop a science-based description of the water supply, including mapping the recharge areas, identification of potential risks, and a plan to prevent contamination of public drinking water sources. The TDWC has proven to be an excellent tool to encourage implementation of these developed plans. The Potter County Public Water Suppliers, with assistance from the Potter County Conservation District, secured an

\$8000.00 WREN Grant to help form the TDWC. The grant was funded in part because the systems were willing to work together in a source water protection coalition. Since a common concern was obtaining good baseline data, the grant also paid for pre-gas well drilling chain of custody water tests on each of the 19 sources that make up these nine public water supplies. Each of these systems now has documented baseline data, related to gas well drilling, for parameters that they do not routinely test for, such as methane and ethane. Gas drilling development has certainly been a catalyst for these systems to unify, but it is not the only issue of concern to these small rural public water supplies. The jointly secured grant also paid for the development and presentation of an outreach program in the community and in the high schools of Potter County that are served by these public water supplies.

The TDWC is also looking for efficiencies in their water treatment operations. They are conducting a survey identifying their contact information, demographic information like how many customers they serve, a list of common inputs like treatment chemicals, where they are purchased and their cost, and finally a list of each system's equipment and what they would charge if another system wanted to rent that piece of equipment. To date, four systems have completed the survey. Each of them is using a different water testing lab and each of them is using different engineering firms. By sharing the survey results, the systems plan to improve their emergency preparedness by adding these other engineering and water testing contacts to their emergency response plan. In addition, the group plans to explore the potential for group purchasing opportunities for commonly used materials such as treatment chemicals. Another idea under consideration is for the systems to jointly develop local emergency water testing capability for times when the water testing lab may be closed, such as weekends or holidays.

Many rural water supplies rely on one or two operators or even a part time operator. Some rarely take a vacation given the 24 hour 7 day a week nature of water systems. The TDWC is rotating their meeting sites so that the area water operators have the opportunity to see and experience a tour of each of the water systems. This helps build resiliency and hopefully, backup capability among the systems. Digital pictures of each system are being developed for a future class with the PA Rural Water Association ([www.prwa.com](http://www.prwa.com)) to hopefully obtain continuing education credits and further develop capacity among the water operators.

Last year, the PA DEP requested comments on their general permit related to brine application for road dust control. The newly developed Triple Divide Watershed Coalition network allowed their members to quickly assess this proposed regulation and create a unified response. In just 48 hours, the coalition submitted the group's comments to DEP with signatures; proving that political influence can be another benefit of a coalition. Incidentally, the PA DEP withdrew their proposed revisions to General Permit WMGR064, as published on September 17, 2011.

The TDWC also is developing a website at [www.tripledividewatershed.com](http://www.tripledividewatershed.com). They are using the website to reach out to their customers and the general public. Two of the systems have individual links set up on the homepage already. They are using the site to share educational messages for their annual citizen's report, known as the Consumer Confidence Report or CCR, which each system is required by law to provide anyway. Additional ideas for educating the general public about source water protection are also shared.

Penn State Extension is working with the TDWC to help deliver an educational program in local high schools entitled "Understanding Water Sources". This effort fit well with the WREN grant because for many years, WREN has supported the development of PA Source Water Environmental Education Teams (SWEET) in Pennsylvania. A SWEET raises awareness and provides education to PA citizens and local officials about protecting sources of drinking water. Rather than requiring each system to go it alone to do public education about local water resources, the SWEET Team can effectively serve a common aquifer area or watershed, since water does not follow municipal boundaries. In the TDWC, the local water operator talks about the local public system and the Extension Educator talks about private water supplies. It is interesting to note that many people, including high school students, have no idea of the source of their drinking water. The formation of the coalition can attract the attention of other agencies like Extension, the planning office, and emergency management, which may have ideas and resources to assist in source water protection.

The final example of the benefits of a coalition is an agreement that was arranged with the Tioga/Potter 911 Response System. The Emergency Management System has taken the watershed delineation GIS maps from the source water protection plans and made them an overlay in their system. If a spill occurs in any of the public water supply delineated recharge areas in Potter and Tioga Counties and 911 or emergency management is called, the PA DEP will be notified through the 911 Center and the appropriate public water supply will be notified, as well. This is a tremendous and important connection that boosts source water protection. Previously, a water supplier may have never received notification that a spill had occurred in their recharge area. It is through the work of the TDWC and its many partners that this notification system is now a reality in this area.

To extend their networking, members of the TDWC have participated in meetings of other source water protection coalitions, like the North Central Source Water Alliance in Lycoming County, and the Tioga County SWP Coalition. The TDWC is one of a handful of new Source Water Teams that have formed recently in Pennsylvania with assistance from the Water Resources Education Network (WREN), a project of the League of Women Voters of PA. For more information and the opening of the 2013 round of WREN Source Water Collaborative Grants, you can contact WREN Project Director, Julie Kollar at [juliekwren@verizon.net](mailto:juliekwren@verizon.net).

For more information on source water protection in Pennsylvania, please visit [www.sourcewaterpa.org](http://www.sourcewaterpa.org). For Profiles on other source water collaborative efforts in Pennsylvania, visit the WREN Features page (<http://wren.palwv.org/feature.html>).

For information on PA DEP's Source Water Protection Technical Assistance Program (SWPTAP), please visit [www.sourcewaterpa.org](http://www.sourcewaterpa.org) and the EPA webpage. You can download the Fact Sheet on the SWPTAP Program. The American Water Works Association established the ANSI/AWWA G300-07 AWWA Standard for Source Water Protection in 2007 and now has a guidebook available. The PA Rural Water Association ([www.prwa.com](http://www.prwa.com)) is also a valued Source Water Protection Partner, and offers assistance to medium and small public water systems.