



Water Vision 2001

A comprehensive regional approach to water policy offers the best hope for addressing our water needs in the new millennium.

BY EARL BLUMENAUER

While the 20th century taught us that many of our environmental problems are interrelated and require integrated solutions, we still have much to learn and a long way to go. We have all too often failed to see that problems of water supply, water quality, and flood control, for example, are related to sprawl, traffic congestion, and air pollution. Consequently, we have failed to understand that these problems demand comprehensive, regional solutions—not piecemeal, local ones.

Consider, for instance, the case of metropolitan Atlanta, where rapid, unplanned growth has led to horrific traffic congestion, the nation's longest average commute, and some of the nation's worst air

pollution. Efforts to ease congestion through more road building, however, have led only to more traffic and more air pollution. The air pollution in Atlanta is now so bad, in fact, that the federal government has withheld funding for highway construction within the city.

The region's waters have also suffered. Road building has eaten up wetlands and precious open space, which retain and purify water. Today, metropolitan Atlanta loses up to 50 acres (20 hectares) of green space a day to pavement, and over 60 percent of the region's rivers and streams do not meet federal water quality standards.

Atlanta is not alone, of course. Water problems abound throughout our nation:

- Despite federal flood-control spending of over \$40 billion since

1960, flood losses top \$4 billion annually—triple the annual real losses of the early 1950s.

- Over half the wetlands in the continental United States have been lost—decreasing the natural capacity to filter water and prevent flooding.

- Some 40 percent of the nation's lakes, rivers, and streams are polluted and unfit for drinking, swimming, or supporting aquatic life.

- Agricultural runoff contaminates 60 percent of the nation's rivers and streams.

- America's cities, towns, and villages face an estimated \$20 billion annual funding gap for water and sewer systems over the next 20 years.

Sadly, government policies force us to approach water management in an inefficient, piecemeal fashion. We cannot afford to continue this approach; water needs are quickly outstripping available supply. Government funds and programs at the local, state, and federal levels are simply not up to the task. Local and state governments have no authority or capacity to deal with water problems that cross political boundaries, while federal regulations do not allow for innovative water-management strategies that could address our needs in a cheaper, greener manner.

Consequently, we cannot guarantee clean drinking water, flood protection, recreational waters, nor critical wildlife habitat—despite the billions of dollars we have invested.

We deserve better and we can do better. Using existing governmental powers and current revenues, we can begin to craft integrated solutions that improve water supply, restore water quality,

prevent floods, and sustain wildlife. The key is to manage our water resources regionally, at the watershed level. This is the premise of Water Vision 2001, an approach that incorporates four critical elements:

- Enacting a Water ISTEA,
- Reshaping the Federal Flood Control Program,
- Reforming the National Flood Insurance Program,
- Strengthening the Coastal Barrier Resources Act.

Water ISTEA

Many of the same issues that confront water policymakers today—limited funding, problems that cross political boundaries, and lack of flexibility—vexed transportation planners for years. Finally recognizing that transportation problems could not be solved one municipality at a time, Congress passed ISTEA (Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act) in 1991. With innovations such as systemwide planning, federal funding flexibility, and a requirement for meaningful citizen participation in regional transportation decisions, ISTEA provided the tools state and local governments needed to create more-effective regional transportation systems. More than a specific piece of transportation legislation, ISTEA initiated a new concept, one that promoted planning-friendly approaches that encouraged governments at all levels to work creatively and collaboratively to address longstanding problems. It met with resounding success.

In 1998, building on the success of the ISTEA model, I introduced House Concurrent Resolution 86a in Congress to create a "Water ISTEA." Its goals are to in-

corporate those same principles of regional planning, federal flexibility, and meaningful citizen participation into a federal approach to regional water management.

Regional planning. A Water ISTEA would recognize the efficiency of regional, rather than local, planning for water resources. Instead of tempting cities and states to deal with water problems merely by shifting them downstream, federal programs would encourage local governments to develop regional partnerships and basinwide water management plans. As in ISTEA, federal funding would be predicated on the adoption of regional management plans.

To illustrate the benefits of a regional approach, let me provide an example from my own experience—one that is, I'm afraid, not unique in our nation. As the city commissioner in charge of Portland's sewer agency in the 1990s, I was frustrated that federal regulations discouraged the city from crafting a regional approach to managing the pollution problems of the Willamette and Columbia Rivers. Once completed, the city of Portland will have invested \$1 billion to eliminate rain-induced sewer overflows into these rivers, yet runoff from farms, golf courses, and construction sites upstream continues to foul our waterways.

If we had been able to use part of our cleanup dollars to address upstream problems, instead of focusing only on local, isolated fixes, we could have enlisted state agencies, rural communities, and citizens along both rivers in a partnership to craft comprehensive solutions to nonpoint-source pollution. Such an approach would have improved water quality over many more river miles and would have

forged greater city-state working relationships. Not incidentally, a "cheap and green" approach would also have educated, activated, and empowered citizens to become better stewards of a treasured resource.

Regional approaches are also critical for effective flood control. The abundance of federal funds for levees and dams has encouraged local governments to employ inefficient, isolated fixes to problems that extend far beyond local boundaries. Levees and dams may limit local flooding, but they usually exacerbate flooding problems in downstream communities. And when floodwaters spill over our best dams and levees, as they inevitably do, even greater damage accrues to peoples' lives and livelihoods. Our overreliance on these expensive structures has lulled millions of people into building and living in harm's way.

Tragic events along the Mississippi River in the past decade clearly illustrate the folly of local flood-control strategies. The Mississippi River between Minneapolis and St. Louis is a complex network of 60 flood control reservoirs, 1,600 levees and 29 locks. In 1993, this watershed experienced its wettest spring in 99 years, causing floods expected only every 100 years, or, in some places, every 500 years. These floods were devastating. Nearly 26,000 people were evacuated, 56,000 homes were damaged, more than 250,000 people were without drinking water for 19 days, and 50 people were killed. All told, the damage costs came to \$15 billion.

Since then, mitigation efforts have been sought to reduce future flooding impacts. Approximately \$212 million was spent to relocate

11,610 at-risk properties. These investments have paid off. In Arnold, Missouri, for example, damage from flooding dropped from \$2 million in 1993 to \$40,000 for a comparable flood in 1995.

Finally, flood control projects can degrade the environment by concentrating flows, preventing natural filtration processes, and causing downstream erosion. They severely limit the amount of water needed for wetlands, and they increase downstream erosion. Additionally, flood controls generally alter the natural landscape, disrupt critical food chains, and disturb natural filtration mechanisms.

Viewed regionally, the benefits of alternative approaches to flood control—such as reserving floodplains and wetlands for river overflow—become clear. Federal subsidies for large-scale flood-control projects, however, skew the local decision-making process in favor of available funds, rather than long term effectiveness.

Federal flexibility. Unfortunately, once communities begin to address water-cycle management from a regional perspective, they find themselves stymied by highly structured federal programs and regulations. Over 20 federal agencies have programs that fund water projects or regulate water use. Yet most limit the way funds may be used and prohibit combining funds from multiple sources.

Water ISTEA would allow communities to decide what kinds of projects best suit their needs. At the very least, communities must be allowed to combine funds for projects that meet multiple objectives. For example, the Department of Agriculture's Crop Reserve Program can be used to reclaim wet-

lands adjacent to a river, while the Federal Emergency Management Agency's pre-disaster mitigation funds can be used to move houses from frequently flooded river banks. Why not combine these funds, since both programs seek to keep humans and their infrastructure out of harm's way while restoring a river's ability to nurture important wetlands? Regulations should also allow for flexibility. Standards must be maintained, but latitude should be granted in how they are achieved. Recognizing the potential for such an approach, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency created the Excellence in Leadership program in 1996 to provide regulatory flexibility in exchange for improved environmental results.

Meaningful citizen participation.

Everyone affects the water cycle, and everyone—particularly taxpayers—can benefit from innovative, regional water management. People care about clean water, wildlife habitat, and flooding, and they want to be part of the solution. A Water ISTEA would help achieve those goals by supporting and expanding programs such as FEMA's Project Impact, which provides funding and education for local communities to learn how to prepare themselves for potential disasters. Allowing educated, committed citizens to become part of the decision-making process always results in better long-term solutions.

Federal Flood Control

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spends upwards of \$1 billion a year building and repairing flood-control projects. Instead of reducing flood losses, however, some projects can actually increase the

potential for flood damage. Some projects encourage high-risk development in flood-prone areas, reduce incentives for effective state and local floodplain management, and eliminate the natural and beneficial functions of floodplains.

To address this problem, I introduced H.R. 1186 to amend the Corps' Flood Control Program. The bill changes the cost-benefit and cost-share formulas that drive the program, making it possible for communities to use federal funds to preserve floodplains and keep development away from rivers and lakes. The elements of the bill were passed as part of the Water Resource Development Act of 1999. Now, communities and the Corps can do the right thing for the environment without paying penalties for archaic funding formulas.

National Flood Insurance

FEMA is required to provide federally backed flood insurance, even for properties in high-hazard areas that suffer storm damage over and over again and receive government payouts each time. These repetitive-loss properties make up only 2 percent of all properties covered by National Flood Insurance but claim 40 percent of all federal flood insurance payouts. During the past 18 years, repetitive losses have cost taxpayers more than \$2.5 billion.

Consequently, Congressman Bereuter of Nebraska and I introduced H.R. 2728 to make the most of flood insurance payments. Policyholders who file two or more claims that, together, total more than the value of the property, and who refuse to relocate or floodproof their property with federal assistance pay the full actuarial costs of the insurance—that is, they pay

the cost of the insurance that is not subsidized by the flood control program.

Coastal Barrier Resources Act

Since its creation in 1982, the Coastal Barrier Resources Act has saved taxpayers approximately \$11 billion by withholding federal flood insurance and infrastructure subsidies from developments on millions of acres of coastal land that is prone to flooding and hurricanes.

Lost in much of the debate about the costs of subsidized flood insurance, however, are the ancillary costs of development. When cheap flood insurance enables a developer to build in a high-risk area, roads, sewage-treatment plants, utilities, public buildings, and other infrastructure follow. The federal taxpayer bears the brunt of replacing this infrastructure after a storm. In fact, over the past 25 years, the federal government has spent \$140 billion of the taxpayers' money preparing for, and recovering from, natural disasters. Were it not for the Coastal Barrier Resources Act, that price tag would have been much higher.

In addition to saving money, this act has protected fragile coastal ecosystems and human life by discouraging those who would build on

lands vulnerable to recurring disaster. People who choose to take the risks of living there should assume the full financial costs of their choice.

Given limited funds and many other important national spending priorities, the Coastal Barrier Resources Act should be model legislation. Unfortunately, the act is being subjected to death-by-a-thousand-cuts as each Congress produces another set of technical corrections to remove land from the Coastal Barrier Resources Act system and entice developers with promises of federal subsidies to build on fragile and dangerous lands.

For example, H.R. 4070, introduced in the 106th Congress, sought to delete 280 acres of land from the protection of the Coastal Barrier Resources Act system—the largest single deletion in its history—and provide subsidies for development in the hurricane-prone Florida Panhandle. If this legislation is reintroduced and passed in the 107th Congress, it will rightly be seen as a brazen grab at taxpayer dollars, and if it succeeds, it will open the floodgates to other developments in equally hazardous locations. Instead of continuously eroding the protections provided by the Coastal Barrier Resources Act, we should be extending those same

protections to the rest of America's wonderful and fragile shoreline.

Public Interest

Water respects no political boundaries; it follows the topography of our landscape. It is a regional resource, requiring regional solutions. Unfortunately, the federal government has not always fostered—and has often interfered with—efforts of local governments to work together for regional solutions. A Water ISTEAs would change that by making the federal government a partner in regional efforts to provide effective water management. Indeed, a Water ISTEAs could pick up where the transportation ISTEAs left off, providing even more examples of regional cooperation to solve longstanding and complex problems. It could provide a sound framework for our metropolitan areas to address the environmental challenges of the 21st century. It could also provide Congress with a rare opportunity: the chance to debate not just how much money to spend, but how to spend money to get the best results. I can think of no better definition of the public interest than that.■

Earl Blumenauer is a U.S. congressman from Portland, Oregon.