

Protect watershed

Create a water budget for Ocean State

**SHEILA DORMODY
SCOTT WOLF**

DRIP, DRIP, DRIP. Rhode Islanders have long been blessed with abundant, clean and affordable water, but these water resources are starting to trickle away.

Water is a critical community resource. We need it for drinking, to create a vibrant economy, to protect our health and safety, and to preserve the rivers and streams that sustain life all around us.

Rhode Island needs a water budget to manage its water supply wisely and to meet its water priorities. Our water is currently plentiful but not unlimited.

At this time, Rhode Island's policy is like throwing a checkbook on the table and simply letting people withdraw water "funds" where and when they choose. Not many people think that would be a responsible way to handle their personal budget.

Fortunately, our legislators are beginning to see that responsible water budgeting is essential for a healthy environment and a growing economy. Both the House and Senate have held hearings, and the exchanges of ideas and information have been responsible and revealing.

The Coalition for Water Security, a Rhode Island partnership of 17 economic- and natural-resource groups, believes that there are four key items that must be included in any legislation that emerges from the General Assembly, or we will not be successful in managing our water and dealing with future challenges:

- Preserve the water re-

sources on which we all depend. Rhode Island cannot afford to continue to deplete our water supplies by withdrawing water without limit. The state's plan for protecting the water supply will not be effective unless it is built on clear, numerical standards for how much water can be withdrawn while leaving enough to replenish our rivers and streams.

- **Reduce excessive use of water in the summer.** Much of the stress on Rhode Island's water supplies comes from the overall doubling of water use in the summertime — mainly for excessive watering of lawns at a time when water is least abundant. This surge in summer water use damages streams, takes water away from economic development, and requires expensive water supply expansion. The state cannot manage water for our future critical needs without equitable and enforceable action to reduce peak summer water use.

- **Take action now.** Rhode Island already has many studies of our water-management problems and there is a clear set of recommendations to address them. The state must establish a

withdrawal authorization system that balances the competing requirements of our numerous waters suppliers and provides adequate water for such priority uses as public safety, household use, environmental quality, economic development, and agriculture. The state must also require effective demand management and water conservation programs.

- **Protect water supplies through land conservation.** Land across Rhode Island has been acquired to protect drinking water supplies, however, there is no provision to ensure that this land cannot subsequently be sold or developed. The General Assembly should make sure that our water supplies are not vulnerable to development and declare that lands acquired to protect drinking water supplies will be permanently protected and will only be used for the purposes for which the land was acquired.

Rhode Island must not allow our waters to trickle away unchecked and without accountability. The Coalition for Water Security is dedicated to working with our colleagues and the legislature to implement the solutions listed above. If these solutions are not accomplished this year, we may lose economic opportunities as well as a fair, statewide protection of supplies and resources. A well-balanced and secure future for our water and our state depends on acting responsibly now.

Sheila Dormody is coordinator of the Coalition for Water Security and Rhode Island director of Clean Water Action; Scott Wolf is the executive director of Grow Smart Rhode Island.

