
(July 30, 2008) Southwest News Herald: Lipinski Wants To Strengthen 'Clean Water'

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A local congressman is championing a drive for cleaner waterways and drinking water.

Cong. Daniel Lipinski (D-3rd) said last week that the federal Clean Water Restoration Act (HR 2421) he is co-sponsoring strengthens the federal Clean Water Act of 1972.

Authored and introduced by Cong. Jim Oberstar (D-Minn.), the proposed legislation is designed to reverse what Lipinski calls moves by the Bush Administration to weaken clean water regulations.

"The Army Corps of Engineers interpreted the (1972) Act as covering all waters, but the (U.S.) Supreme Court and actions by the Bush Administration said no, it doesn't cover all waterways - only navigable waters that (commercial) shipping is allowed on," Lipinski said.

That's a key point, the congressman noted, because pollution of smaller non-commercial bodies of water - like small lakes, feeder streams and rivers - directly leads to pollution of the nation's largest reserves of fresh water, including Lake Michigan and all five Great Lakes.

The Clean Water Restoration Act would clarify that the 1972 Clean Water Act protections apply broadly to American surface waters, including all wetlands and streams in the Great Lakes region -making clear that the Clean Water Act's primary purpose is to protect the nation's waters from pollution.

Under new Bush Administration policies and court decisions, 59 percent of streams and 20 million acres of wetlands nationwide are at risk of unrestricted pollution, according to Lipinski and others.

In Illinois alone, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that about 150,000 acres of wetlands that are critical to the health of the Great Lakes are vulnerable to losing Clean Water Act safeguards.

Pollution of southwest suburban waterways has been a hot issue in recent years, with concerns voiced about Stony Creek, the Melvina Ditch, the Illinois and Michigan Canal and others.

All waterways, even the smallest creeks and ponds, are interconnected parts of watershed systems that ultimately feed into drinking water reservoirs.

Earlier this month, when Lipinski stood with leading environmentalists outside the Shedd Aquarium to announce his support for the legislation, he noted that "Lake Michigan has always held significant meaning to me and has provided many memories as I grew up and lived along its shores.

"But the Great Lakes are so much more. Holding 90 percent of our nation's fresh water supply and nearly 20 percent of the world supply, we are dependent upon the Great Lakes for everything from fresh drinking water to transportation, tourism, recreation, and the \$4.1 billion sport and commercial fishing industry.

"Across our nation, Americans rely on our rivers, lakes, streams, and bays for clean water to drink and safe places to swim, boat, and fish."

The original Clean Water Act was passed in 1972. It passed by a 74-0 vote in the Senate and a 366-11 vote in the House.

Those who framed the law and passed it viewed it as sweeping and all-encompassing.

Democratic Senator Edmund Muskie of Maine called the Act "the means to eliminate the cancer of water pollution." Republican Cong. William Harsha of Ohio called it "the most significant environmental legislation in the history of Congress."

In 1972, Time magazine wrote, "There can be no doubt of the act's importance. It aims at nothing less than the end of pollution of U.S. waterways..."

The proposed Clean Water Restoration Act is opposed by several large agribusiness associations, including the Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund, United Stockgrowers of America and the National Corn Growers Association, which claim the measure unjustly expands federal authority to infringe on private property rights.

Advocates counter that runoff from large factory farms and industrial-sized livestock feedlots - runoff that includes toxic pesticides and herbicides, as well as e.coli and Salmonella bacteria from fecal matter - is a major cause of pollution of the nation's watersheds and waterways, many of which (like Lake Michigan) serve as drinking water reservoirs for millions of Americans.

Critics of the Bush administration's attempt to re-interpret the law point out that Bush Administration officials themselves have publicly acknowledged the fragile and interconnected nature of the nation's waterways and watershed system.

"We all have an obligation to be good stewards of our natural heritage by caring for our watersheds. After all, one of the most important ways we can protect our rivers, lakes and streams is by better managing what happens in the watersheds in which they are located," said U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Water administrator Benjamin Grumbles at a public event in Delaware in 2004. "That's because the greatest threat to America's waterways today comes not from pollution dumped into them directly, but from pollution that runs-off into them - non-point source pollution."