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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/pelr/vol32/iss2/8

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ARTICLE

The Safe Drinking Water / Food Law Nexus

MARGOT J. POLLANS∗

At 2 AM on August 2, 2014, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency issued the following warning to the citizens of Toledo: “Do Not Drink.”† The Ohio City’s tap water was contaminated with microcystin, a toxin that can cause diarrhea, vomiting, and abnormal liver function.‡ The source was an algal bloom in Lake Erie resulting from high levels of agricultural fertilizers and animal waste.§ For three days, Toledo residents drank only bottled water.

This is just one of many similar examples of agricultural contamination of urban drinking water supplies. Creating a physical connection between urban and rural communities, this pollution highlights the need for an environmentally-minded and systems-based food and agriculture law.

Despite over forty years of extensive federal regulation of water pollution, agricultural waste, most of which enters drinking water as “nonpoint source pollution,” remains a significant threat to safe drinking water as well as aquatic ecosystems. Climate

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‡ Id.
§ Id.

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change threatens to exacerbate this threat. Furthermore, the Clean Water Act’s failure to address these harms is well documented. The Act provides no federally enforceable mechanism for mitigating nonpoint source pollution. Many have proposed solutions including radical amendments of the statute itself, aggressive state action to fill the gap, and expansion of the United States Department of Agriculture’s conservation programs which pay farmers to change their practices to reduce water contamination.

As a component of food law, the Clean Water Act's failure to address agricultural water pollution must be understood as a backdrop to a companion federal statute: the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA). The SDWA requires the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to set drinking water standards for harmful contaminants, and it requires that public water utilities meet those standards either through water filtration and treatment, or through source water protection.

The SDWA is widely attacked, particularly by local government officials, as an unfunded mandate imposing

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8. Id. § 300g-1 (mandating that the EPA set national drinking water standards); id. § 300g-2 (delegating primary enforcement authority to the states). Public water utilities are utilities that provide water to at least twenty-five people or have at least fifteen service connections. Id. § 300f(4). The statutory requirements thus do not apply to wells or to very small drinking water systems.
excessive, and often unjustified, costs on local governments. Critics argue that its uniform and risk-averse requirements reflect the need to devolve authority to states to engage in more location-specific standard setting. Proponents argue that the cost and complexity of risk assessment combined with the need to provide uniformly clean water to all, justify federal intervention.

This debate, which focuses on the SDWA in isolation from the Clean Water Act, misses a central flaw in the structure of the SDWA. As implemented by the EPA and the states, the SDWA assigns primary responsibility for provision of clean water to municipal and regional water utilities that often have little or no control over drinking water sources.

Where point source pollution is the primary threat to safe water, this allocation is reasonable. Water utilities are simply providing a backstop to ensure that water, whose content is often already heavily policed under the Clean Water Act, is safe to drink.

By contrast, where the primary threat to safe drinking water is nonpoint source pollution, water utilities provide what is often the first line of defense. Of the nearly ninety pollutants for which the EPA sets SDWA standards, at least twenty-four enter

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9. Scott D. Laufenberg, The Struggle of Cities to Implement the Safe Drinking Water Act in the Context of Intergovernmental Relations, 3 Drake J. AGRIC. L. 495, 499 (1998) (observing that the SDWA can be extremely burdensome for municipalities adjacent to agricultural communities); David L. Markell, The Role of Local Governments in Environmental Regulation: Shoring Up Our Federal System, 44 SYRACUSE L. REV. 895, 898-90 (1993) (describing concern that the SDWA fails to prioritize among various risks); Jeffrey Marks, The Role of Federal Environmental Mandates in Intergovernmental Relations, 20 ENVIRON'S ENVT'L. L. & POL'Y J. 17, 23 (1996) (observing that many local officials have called for increased local flexibility in standard setting and explaining that tension arises when federal financial support does not keep up with rising compliance costs); Rena I. Steinzor, Unfunded Environmental Mandates and the “New (New) Federalism”: Devolution, Revolution, or Reform?, 81 Minn. L. Rev. 97, 202 (1996) (arguing that the SDWA regulations do not allow adequate tailoring to local conditions or adequate assessment of compliance feasibility).

10. See, e.g., Steinzor, supra note 9, at 140, 171-73 (noting that cities and counties identify the SDWA as one of the most expensive federal mandates but expressing concern that “unrestricted devolution of fundamental regulatory decisions to the local level” could result in massive inequality in availability of safe drinking water).
waterways through agricultural nonpoint source pollution. The list includes pesticides, herbicides, nitrates, and microbial contaminants from animal waste. Without independent source controls, water utilities must engage in burdensome cleanup in order to meet SDWA standards.

Taken together, the Clean Water Act and the SDWA thus assign primary responsibility for nonpoint source pollution cleanup to water utilities. Although both statutes envision a role for states in establishing source control programs, neither statute mandates such controls, and many states have declined to develop robust programs. In the remainder of this essay, I will draw three conclusions about this dynamic.

First, in the long run, particularly if predictions are correct that climate change will exacerbate the risk of drinking water contamination from agricultural pollutants, the dynamic described in the preceding paragraphs could serve as an

12. See EPA, supra note 11.
important catalyst for change. As filtration and treatment costs rise, water utilities and the state agencies overseeing them will continue to seek alternative approaches, including using litigation to reallocate mitigation costs from municipal ratepayers to farmers. They may also put pressure on state governments to develop more comprehensive nonpoint source pollution regulatory programs. Public support for such efforts may also increase in response to high salience contamination events, such as the Toledo incident described above. In other words, this type of extremely costly and public pollution in urban areas creates a constituency for environmental protection that may not have existed before.

Second, the failure to regulate nonpoint source pollution creates an arbitrary assignment of pollution abatement costs. The extent to which a water utility provides the first line of defense or merely end-of-line finishing cleanup depends on the nature of the pollution source.

15. See Adler, supra note 4, at 875 (describing the potential effects of climate change on drinking water).


17. Of course, other factors affect the scope of cleanup necessary to meet SDWA standards. A utility whose source water has many point sources may face
water pollution must take on this extra cost; utilities outside that ambit need not. This concern is a more specific variation of the general concern that the statute imposes uniform standards on utilities facing highly variable compliance costs. Indeed, this is a standard critique of many types of uniform federal regulations.

What is different and particularly troublesome here is that the variation stems from underlying disparate application of the “polluter pays” principle. Because a large category of polluters are not responsible for the costs of the water pollution they cause, a subset of water utilities are saddled with extra costs. Ratepayers ultimately bear the burden of this arbitrary allocation of costs. Although there is some federal and state financial assistance, a substantial portion of increased compliance costs falls to water users.

This allocation of responsibility is often inefficient. In some cases, it is less costly to control the source than it is to filter or treat at the tap, particularly where increased contamination

a larger burden than one with fewer, even if all those sources are complying with their Clean Water Act obligations. Likewise, a utility that relies heavily on groundwater, which is generally not directly policed under the Clean Water Act, may face similar problems. See James Salzman, Drinking Water: A History 127-31 (2013) (describing the threat of fracking).

18. In the context of the SDWA, proponents of less uniform regulations believe that the statute imposes costly obligations whether or not they are relevant to different regions. Some also believe that localities should have the leeway to opt for lower safety standards if that is their preference.


20. See, e.g., Funding Sources, EPA, http://water.epa.gov/lawsregs/rulesregs/sdwa/arsenic/funding.cfm (last updated Mar. 6, 2012), archived at http://perma.cc/B7NS-XFBX. Rate increases also depend on the size of a water district. A 1990s EPA study on water utility financial capacity revealed that for large systems, compliance required increasing average annual rates by about three dollars per household; for smaller systems, the average increase was $145. Steinzor, supra note 9, at 208-09.
necessitates building entirely new treatment facilities. In theory, if a water utility determines that source protection is cheaper than building or renovating a treatment or filtration facility, it should engage in Coasian bargaining and pay for protection rather than build or renovate the treatment or filtration facility. Some water utilities are able to take control of their source water via land purchase or through green payments to landowners to reduce their pollution. New York City is one of the best examples of a large urban water system that has successfully protected its source waters and does not filter its water. But for many municipalities and water utilities the transaction costs to take control of source water are simply too high. These transaction costs may include, among others, difficulty identifying sources, lack of political will at the state level to develop nonpoint source pollution controls, lack of will


23. The 1996 Amendments to the SDWA acknowledged the importance of source water protection and created a mechanism for water utilities to engage in source control as an alternative to filtration and treatment. Safe Drinking Water Act Amendments of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-182 (1996) (codified as amended in throughout title 42 of the U.S. Code). Filtration avoidance is available where the utility demonstrates adequate ownership or control over the source watershed: “[t]he public water system must demonstrate through ownership and/or written agreements with landowners within the watershed that it can control all human activities which may have an adverse impact on the microbiological quality of the source water.” 40 C.F.R. § 141.71(b)(iv)(2)(iii) (2015). Filtration avoidance is also a possibility where a utility relies on water from “uninhabited, undeveloped watersheds in consolidated ownership, and having control over access to, and activities in, those watersheds.” 42 U.S.C. § 300g-1(b)(7)(C)(v) (2012).

among polluters to engage in negotiation, or lack of expertise at
the public water utility about source control options.\textsuperscript{25}

The ancillary benefits of prevention at the source—beyond
safer drinking water—also sway this cost benefit analysis.
Prevention at the source protects aquatic ecosystems, creating
benefits for biodiversity, the recreation industry, the fishing
industry, and for agriculture itself where pollution affects sources
of irrigation water.\textsuperscript{26} Agricultural nonpoint source pollution
generates numerous environmental and human health costs. The
SDWA mitigates only one of those costs.

Finally, as the title of this essay suggests, the interaction
between the two statutes must be understood in the broader
context of the food system. Water is food too. I mean this in the
literal sense: the Food Drug and Cosmetic Act defines food as
“articles used for food or drink for man or other animals.”\textsuperscript{27} But,
water is often excluded from discussions about the importance of
protecting our food system. The agriculture industry has been
very successful at curbing federal environmental regulation.\textsuperscript{28}
Among the industry’s wide-ranging rhetoric is the argument that
meager regulation generates the benefit of cheap food, which we
all enjoy. But letting farmers off the hook in the name of cheap

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Even New York City would likely not be able to achieve the level of source
control it now enjoys had it not taken significant steps to obtain that control
over a century ago. In the late nineteenth century, the City annexed lands and
protected large swaths of land for watershed protection at a time when there
was widespread support for this kind of aggressive step to protect the City’s
economic competitiveness and with little resistance from the surrounding
territories. \textit{See generally Matthew Gandy, Concrete and Clay: Reworking
Nature in New York City 18-23 (2003) (retelling the history of New York City’s
water infrastructure and the political context’s that made its development
possible). Given changed political circumstances this model would be difficult, if
not impossible, to replicate today.}

\item \textsuperscript{26} \textit{See Marc O. Ribaudo et al., Economics of Water Quality Protection
from Nonpoint Sources: Theory and Practice 23-25 (1999), available at
79YA-87W7.}

\item \textsuperscript{27} 21 U.S.C. § 321(f)(1). While the EPA regulates tap water through the
SDWA, the Food and Drug Administration regulates bottle water as a food
pursuant to the Food Drug and Cosmetic Act (FDCA).

\item \textsuperscript{28} \textit{See Megan Stubbs, Cong. Research Serv., R41622, Environmental
/R41622.pdf, archived at http://perma.cc/L539-5Q6X.}
\end{itemize}
food is less justifiable, if it was ever justifiable, if the spillover cost is expensive water.\textsuperscript{29}

Even worse, the interplay between the Clean Water Act and the SDWA pits cities against agricultural areas, and residential communities against farmers. Although some urban water utilities and environmental protection agencies have or could enter into cooperative relationships with their rural hinterlands, others will take a more antagonistic path.\textsuperscript{30} This antagonism perpetuates the perception of an urban/rural dichotomy and obscures the mutually dependent relationship between the two that is the basis of a healthy food system.\textsuperscript{31}

To return to the theme of this symposium, reconceptualizing the future of environmental law, the dynamic between the SDWA and the Clean Water Act highlights the need for a systems approach to thinking about environmental regulation of the food system.\textsuperscript{32} Water is an environmental system in physical space. It feeds farms (as irrigation water), it collects their pollution (from irrigation and stormwater runoff), and it feeds municipalities (as drinking water). This system crosses political jurisdictions. A regulatory system that creates antagonism across jurisdictions makes this physical system more difficult to manage.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{29} Another way to think about this is that water contamination is itself a food safety issue. Water safety law thus suffers from a similar critical flaw with the recent food safety modernization. Neither statute adequately addresses sources of cross contamination. Just as the SDWA provides no mechanism to address nonpoint source pollution, the Food Safety Modernization Act provides inadequate mechanisms to protect leafy greens and other fresh produce from contaminated runoff from concentrated animal feeding operations. 42 U.S.C. § 300f-g; FDA Food Safety Modernization Act, Pub. L. No. 111-353, 124 Stat. 3885 (codified as amended throughout title 21 of the U.S. Code).

\textsuperscript{30} See supra text accompanying note 16.


\textsuperscript{32} See, e.g., Jody Freeman & Daniel A. Farber, Modular Environmental Regulation, 54 DUKE L.J. 795 (2005) (calling for “a high degree of flexible coordination across government agencies as well as between public agencies and private actors” to allow for creative and bigger picture problem solving).

\textsuperscript{33} Many scholars have recognized the mismatch between environmental systems and political systems and have considered how political systems should approach environmental regulation in light of both this fact and the fact that environmental systems themselves are extraordinarily complex. See, e.g., J.B. Ruhl, Thinking of Environmental Law as a Complex Adaptive System: How to
Access to safe drinking water is nearly ubiquitous in this country. Efficient (as in cost minimizing) preservation of this resource requires reconciliation of the various statutory schemes that govern the resource and the various political jurisdictions that manage it. Food Law, as an outgrowth of environmental law, among other things, provides a useful lens through which to approach this reconciliation. As an emerging discipline, Food Law invites a fresh examination of water as a complex element of the food system, drawing together what otherwise might be disparate environmental law questions related to equitable access to safe drinking water, preservation of aquatic ecosystems, and transitions to sustainable agriculture.

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Clean up the Environment by Making a Mess of Environmental Law, 34 Hous. L. Rev. 933, 981 (1997).