

Clean water: Economically essential to this state

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From Betty Chafin Rash and Stan Vaughan, trustees of the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund:

Thirteen years ago, the state was facing an unprecedented environmental crisis. Its most precious water resources were threatened by pollution resulting from increasing development and the transition away from North Carolina's more traditional economy. Fish kills in the Neuse River spawned national and international media attention on the state's ailing water resources.

That was a call to action for the State of North Carolina. In response, the General Assembly created the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund with a mandate to make grants to clean up impaired waters and protect our remaining pristine waters.

Since 1996, CWMTF has awarded more than \$950 million in 1,319 grants to protect surface water all across North Carolina. These grant funds have leveraged more than \$1.4 billion in private and public funds to help improve water quality and the state's natural resources.

Because of the state's budget crisis, CWMTF lost \$115 million for the 2008-2009 fiscal year. CWMTF's annual \$100 million appropriation was cut in half for the 2009-2010 fiscal year. Given the enormity of the financial crisis, it's understandable that the program was cut just as other priority projects were.

As North Carolina feels the lingering effects of the economic crisis, clean water investments will be as critical to protecting our economy as they are to our environment. As the state's economy rebounds, we will need healthy water supplies more than ever before.

CWMTF's wastewater treatment and stormwater management projects increase protection of water supplies for the future. They also are key to the state's infrastructure needs and are important to economic stimulus.

Just as important is strategic land acquisition. Creating development-free buffer zones along our waterways keeps our water supplies clean by reducing the pollutants that flow into them from sedimentation, erosion and other land-disturbing activities.

CWMTF has invested \$3 million to help create the regional Carolina Thread Trail, and nearly \$12 million to protect Mountain Island Lake, the source of drinking water for a million people in Mecklenburg, Gaston and Lincoln Counties.

CWMTF has provided more than \$8.1 million to help Mecklenburg County and Charlotte manage stormwater and restore urban streams to improve water quality. These grants have focused primarily on Sugar Creek, Little Sugar Creek and McAlpine Creek, which were among the state's worst polluted streams.

With the help of CWMTF, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has been able to purchase and protect undeveloped property along important stream corridors. One is the 15-mile Little Sugar Creek Greenway that when completed will offer recreational opportunities as well as flood damage control.

Land investments to protect rivers, streams, creeks and estuaries also protect the state's \$16.5 billion tourism industry. Chimney Rock and Grandfather Mountain would likely have been lost if not for the availability of trust fund grants. North Carolina's natural beauty, including its rivers and streams, is one of its biggest selling points in attracting visitors, retirees and new businesses.

Demand on our water supplies will increase in the coming years as our population continues to grow. If we do not invest in preserving what we have now, we may find ourselves in dire straits during the next drought.

CWMTF and its conservation partners are poised to play a major role in helping North Carolina meet the economic challenges ahead, but we will continue to need funds appropriated by the General Assembly to make that possible.

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