THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY SPEAKS ABOUT WATER QUALITY

202nd General Assembly (1990)

Contamination of waterways and groundwater has become a major focus of environmental concern and action. To get a manageable handle on this large subject, the Eco-Justice Task Force decided to focus on two examples: the case of the Puget Sound and water problems particular to Pennsylvania. The Puget Sound Symposium was co-sponsored by the Eco-Justice Task Force of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Commission for Church in Society of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Pacific Lutheran University, the Washington State Department of Ecology, the Puget Sound Water Quality Authority, and the Puget Sound National Bank. The Pennsylvania symposium was jointly sponsored by the Eco-Justice Task Force, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and eight presbyteries and two synods from the tri-state area. Both events were notable for their integration of scientific, economic, political, and ethical perspectives to produce a holistic overview of the water problems in their regions.

The Puget Sound case illustrates the kinds of problems that are found in relation to countless other bays and watersheds in the nation and throughout the world. The growth of population in the Puget Sound basin (soon to be three million), the various kinds of development accompanying it, and the use of polluting technologies have led to the pollution of the sound and to a major loss of wetlands.

Three classes of contaminants affect the sound: synthetic organic chemicals, inorganic chemicals, and the biological contaminants that come mostly from sewage. About 20 percent of these contaminants eventually reach the open ocean, but most are deposited in sediments in the sound.

The main sources of "point" pollution (from specific, identifiable points of discharge) are municipal sewage treatment plants, industries, and "combined sewers" (which carry both sewage and storm water and overflow when their capacity is exceeded). "Nonpoint" or "runoff" sources of pollution are numerous and dispersed—e.g., soil erosion, water runoff containing pesticide and herbicide residues, failed septic systems, landfill leachate, and spillages and illegal discharges from boats.

In areas of high density and industrial activity, such as the Puget Sound watershed, the detrimental effects of pollution keep mounting. Scientifically, much remains unknown about the seriousness of the damage done or that which is likely to occur. Nor can scientists say definitely when "clean" water is clean enough. The hard political-economic fact is that it is expensive to keep water clean and even more expensive to restore it to an acceptable state.

But the detrimental effects of deteriorating water quality demand that action be taken. So hard questions are raised about drawing lines and making trade-offs (slower development for more protection?) and about who should pay and what measures will work. While everyone agrees that education is part of the solution, there is disagreement over the relative merits of using regulations or price incentives (i.e., charging polluters

for polluting, so that they have an incentive to do otherwise). Underlying all these measures are questions of justice and concern for creation—the welfare of the nonhuman, the claims of future generations, and the strong inclination of the powerful to reap benefits for themselves, while transferring burdens to the weak and the unborn.

This case study shows the need for the church at all levels, national to local, to support through education and influence on public policy a vigorous campaign to improve water quality throughout the nation.

Therefore, the 202nd General Assembly (1990) recommends:

A. Basic Policies in Support of Water Quality

1. Increased federal, state, local, and private funding for the investigation of air, water, and ground contamination, to include basic scientific research, the establishment of baselines for data, and the monitoring of specific problems.

2. The pursuit of a three-pronged strategy—education, regulation, and economic incentives—to combat environmental pollution.

3. Greater coordination of legal jurisdictions, reliance on the concept of watershed or groundwater basin in identifying the jurisdictions to be coordinated, and the use of integrated approaches in planning and action.

4. Placing the burden of proof that water quality is not degraded on those who discharge or introduce potentially harmful substances to the environment.

B. Implementation of Policies

1. The vigorous protection of remaining wetlands through the enforcement of existing laws.

2. Increased funding for the conversion of municipal sewage plants that provide only primary treatment (50 percent removal of suspended solids and metals) to facilities that provide secondary treatment (85 to 95 percent removal), and for the elimination of combined sewer systems and storm runoff in urban areas.

3. Tighter restrictions on point sources of water pollution and illegal dumping.

4. Increased efforts to address the problem of pollution from urban and rural runoff.

5. Research on methods of preventing and controlling ground water contamination.

6. Consistent application of national water quality standards.

7. Continued study and greater control of acid rain and airborne contaminants that enter surface water, in coordination with air quality authorities.

8. Increased federal funding for national estuary planning and action.

9. The upgrading of municipal water systems.