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RE: OP-ED

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### **The Susquehanna: A River Under Stress -- But Not The Nation's Most Endangered**

Given my position with the Susquehanna River Basin Commission (SRBC), it comes as no surprise that people are asking me for my reaction to the recent American Rivers report declaring the Susquehanna River the nation's number one endangered river. Many people are concerned by American Rivers' characterization of the Susquehanna River as a cesspool, while others have embraced it without question. The Commission's position is one of balance, because we are relying on the facts to guide us.

And the facts tell us that, while the Susquehanna River admittedly has its share of serious water quality problems, it is by no means the most endangered. American Rivers' efforts to raise awareness of the water quality problems in the Susquehanna may be well intended, but the endangered designation did create confusion. Some people have even concluded that the Susquehanna is a filthy river to be avoided. And that unintended consequence troubles me.

Yes, there are localized and some regional water quality problems, but by-and-large, the water quality of the Susquehanna River is in good condition and continuing to improve. In fact, there are areas in the Susquehanna basin, including the New York portion, where the water quality is exceptional. Our own monitoring data, which we collect and analyze based on sound science, show significant reductions in nutrients and sediments in the river. That reduction in the Susquehanna translates to reduced levels reaching the Chesapeake Bay.

There are many other indicators that point to the Susquehanna as being a healthy riverine system. The Susquehanna enjoys the reputation as a world-renowned smallmouth bass fishery. It's also host to recreational outfitters like Endless Mountain Outfitters, Blue Mountain Outfitters and Shank's Mare. The construction of fish passage facilities at the dams in the lower Susquehanna River, at a cost exceeding \$50 million, has enabled American shad and other migratory fish species to return to their historic spawning water in the Susquehanna and its tributaries.

There are also many local success stories of improved water quality. For example, in my own watershed, coal mining from the 1850s virtually eliminated all aquatic life in the upper reaches

of the Swatara Creek Watershed in Lebanon and Schuylkill Counties. But now, because of stream improvements, native brook trout have returned and their numbers and species continue to increase every year. Similar success stories can be cited for other projects throughout the Susquehanna basin.

Despite all the successes, much work remains to be done to further improve water quality. Cathy Curran Myers, Pennsylvania's Alternate SRBC Commissioner, put it very well when she recently referred to the Susquehanna River as a "crown jewel under stress." She pointed out that less than 15 percent of it is included as impaired on EPA's dirty water list. "The Susquehanna sends the cleanest water of any tributary to the Chesapeake Bay, but it is not clean enough."

Nutrients, sediment and drainage from abandoned mine lands (AMD) are three of the primary sources of water quality impairment in the basin. Based on 2000 estimates, the Pennsylvania portion of the Susquehanna basin has more than \$2.8 billion in AMD reclamation needs. Even more sobering are EPA's cost estimates for the overall effort to restore the Chesapeake Bay: \$27 billion in capital expenditures and an additional \$2.7 billion annually.

We also agree that there are tremendous infrastructure improvement needs for Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) systems. As of 2000, the estimated cost to solve this problem in Pennsylvania alone was \$4 billion. Incidentally, the CSO issue is by no means unique to the Susquehanna basin or to Pennsylvania.

The Susquehanna River is a tremendous resource, but it has some very real needs to ensure its long-term management and protection. Given the sheer size of the Susquehanna River Basin – with more than 31,000 miles of streams – meeting those needs in the long term will require everyone's best effort.

Among other legislative remedies, the Susquehanna needs help from our elected officials to reauthorize the federal Abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund. Constituents who care about the Susquehanna need to voice their support for legislative initiatives such as the one introduced by Pennsylvania Senator Ray Musto to provide funding for CSO system upgrades.

Just as important, there is simply no substitute for stewardship of the Susquehanna "back home." We are grateful for all the good work being done by the 189 active watershed organizations in the basin.

American Rivers' designation of the Susquehanna River as the nation's most endangered may not be an accurate characterization of the overall water quality of the river. However, I hope that it will serve as a call to action for everyone who cares about its future.

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