

# The Patriot-News

## Buffer plan benefits streams

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Sunday, September 21, 2008

BY BOB WENDELGASS

Nearly 15 percent of Pennsylvania's 83,000 miles of rivers and streams are so polluted they are on the nation's "dirty waters" list. Homes and lives are tragically lost in floods every year in the commonwealth. Forests are cut down for development in the Chesapeake Bay region at a rate of 100 acres a day. Global climate change is the greatest environmental challenge of our generation.

What one simple solution can go a long way in addressing all of these problems? Trees along streams. That is, preserving them where they still stand, and planting them where they do not.

Where forests remain along our streams, water quality is protected, flood waters are reduced, wildlife habitat is provided, and healthier communities are created. For decades, we have built too close to streams, cutting down the forests at their edges and filling floodplains to make way for homes and businesses. We are now paying the high price tag to deal with flood damage, water pollution and lower quality of life.

The time has come to stop making the mistakes of the past. Today we need to build outside of floodplains and far enough from streams so that streamside forests can work their magic, and we can avoid the costs of cleaning up polluted water and paying for homes damaged by floods.

That's why the Pennsylvania Campaign for Clean Water is urging Pennsylvania to require minimum 100-foot forested buffers along all streams and rivers in our state. Our plan, "Buffers 100," calls for a buffer zone of at least 100 feet along both sides of a stream or river for any new developments. Development would be allowed only outside of this zone. Exemptions to the 100-foot buffer include any existing development within the buffer zone, and farming activities. Special variances or exemptions also would protect property owners whose land is located within the zone.

Why 100 feet? The scientific consensus is clear: Buffers less than 100 feet are less able to reduce pollution and prevent flooding, and are less effective at protecting our streams and drinking water.

Preserving a 100-foot buffer zone between our streams and any new development allows runoff to soak into the ground when it rains, instead of rushing directly into our streams. This water is then purified by plants and the soil and released more slowly into the stream, preventing pollution, erosion and flood damage. The trees also shade the stream, holding down water temperatures and providing better habitat for trout and other fish.

People living along the stream also benefit from this buffer. Decreasing the amount of water that rushes into a stream when it rains can reduce flooding, thus reducing property damage and the expenses that might result from a flood.

Buffers save communities money in other ways, too. Buffers can reduce the cost of stormwater management by cutting the need for expensive stormwater structures. Keeping our streams clean also makes our drinking water safer and less expensive to treat.

Buffers mean healthy communities and healthier Pennsylvanians. Kids will have more places to play. Anglers can walk outside in the morning and catch a few trout before heading off to work. Evening hikes through the woods will include the serenade of the wood thrush. Planting more trees will help curb climate change.

Dozens of municipalities across the state already require buffers of 100 feet or more for new development, and they know that buffers work. But to really make a difference, we need buffers on every stream and in every community. A community can require buffers to protect its stream, but if its upstream neighbors don't also require buffers, the community can still suffer from too much pollution or flooding. That's why Pennsylvania needs to make sure that buffers protect all streams in our state.

Some 130 environmental groups, hunting and fishing organizations, small businesses and municipal governments have joined with the Pennsylvania Campaign for Clean Water to support "Buffers 100."

Dozens of state legislators, both Republican and Democrat, also have endorsed our proposal. They know that keeping new development 100 feet back from our rivers and streams is just plain common sense.

It's time for Pennsylvania to act. We need to require at least 100-foot forested buffers on both sides of all streams. It's the least we can do to protect our streams and our communities.