A River Bounces Back

The lower Delaware was an open sewer at the height of World War II. Along some reaches the fouled water was devoid of the oxygen needed to support fish and other aquatic life. A major goal in those early days was to bring the river back to life.

Blazing a new trail in water pollution abatement, the DRBC in 1967 adopted the most comprehensive water quality standards of any interstate river basin in the nation. The standards were tied to an innovative waste load allocation program that factored in the tidal Delaware River's capacity to assimilate waste.

A year later the DRBC adopted regulations for implementing and enforcing the standards, prompting the Federal Water Pollution Control Administration to observe: "This is the only place in the country where such a procedure is being followed. Hopefully, it will provide a model for other regulatory agencies."

The cleanup of the Delaware and numerous other DRBC accomplishments are rooted in the Compact's chief canon: that the waters and related resources of the Delaware River Basin are regional assets vested with local, state, and national interests for which there is a joint responsibility.

A look now at those accomplishments and at milestones that have marked the path of progress.

The mainstem Delaware River extends 330 miles from the confluence of its East and West branches near Hancock, N.Y., to the mouth of the Delaware Bay.

Almost 7 percent of the nation's population relies on the basin's waters for drinking and industrial use, and the bay is but a gas tank away for roughly 40 percent of the people living in the United States. Yet, the watershed drains only 0.4 percent of the continental U.S. land area.

In all, the basin comprises 13,539 square miles, including portions of Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.

The members of the Delaware River Basin Commission are the governors of the four basin states and a federal member appointed by the President of the United States. The governors appoint alternate commissioners, selecting high-ranking officials in the four state environmental regulatory agencies.

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Printed on recycled paper with soy inks.

Years before there was an E.P.A., or a federal Clean Water Act, or even an environmental movement, a little government agency was hard at work restoring life to one of America's most polluted rivers.

Today, almost four decades later, the cleanup of the Delaware is hailed as one of the world's top water quality success stories.

A pioneer in environmental protection, the Delaware River Basin Commission (DRBC) got its start on October 27, 1961, the day the Delaware River Basin Compact became law. The Compact's signing marked the first time since the nation's birth that the federal government and a group of states joined as equal partners in a river basin planning, development, and regulatory agency.

When the DRBC was created, some 43 state, 14 interstate, and 19 federal agencies exercised a multiplicity of splintered powers and duties within the watershed. The Compact created a regional body with the force of law to oversee a unified approach to managing the river system without regard to political boundaries.

Cover photo of Upper Delaware: Warren Huff

The Little Agency That Could

Currents of Time

1962 The DRBC approves its first Comprehensive Plan, which includes a dozen multi-purpose reservoir projects, including Tocks Island, a giant impoundment planned for the Delaware's main stem.

1965 The DRBC declares a state of water supply emergency and unleashes a fundamental tenet of the Compact—to settle water disputes through an administrative process. The DRBC's role is pivotal in negotiating successful, out-of-court policy on emergency water allocations.

1966 The DRBC publishes its Delaware River Recreation Maps, which instantly become as popular as paddles with canoeists.

1968 The Commission sets national precedent in its water pollution abatement campaign, adopting regulations to implement water quality standards for the Delaware Estuary that are tied to an innovative wasteload allocation program.

"Only the Delaware among the nation's river basins is moving into high gear in its program to combat water pollution."

1968—Stewart Udall, Secretary U.S. Department of the Interior (1961–1969)

1971 Construction of Beltzville Reservoir at the headwaters of the Lehigh River is completed at a cost of $23 million. Releases from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' impoundment (plus releases from Blue Marsh Reservoir, then under construction) help improve stream flows, enhance water quality, and protect fisheries.

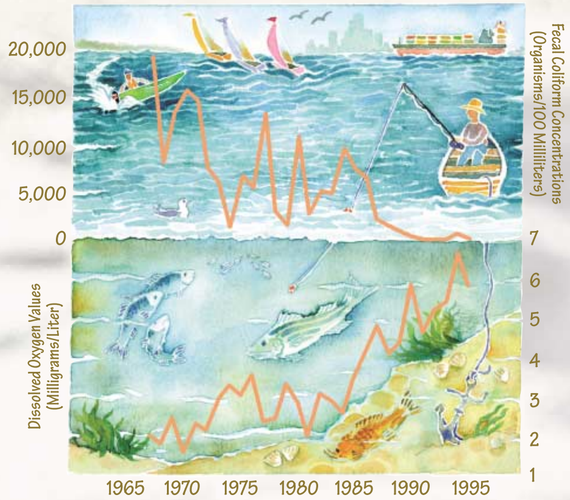
1973 The DRBC adopts a regulation requiring metering of customer connections of new, major water supply systems, kicking off a water conservation campaign years before it becomes fashionable with other agencies.

1975 In a split vote, DRBC commissioners recommend that Congress not appropriate funds for the construction of the Tocks Island project, knocking the keystone out of the Commission's blueprint for long-range water management.

1976 The DRBC completes flood plain mapping for 119 municipalities, helping them to qualify for federal flood insurance. Flood plain mapping is completed for 32 additional communities in ensuing years.

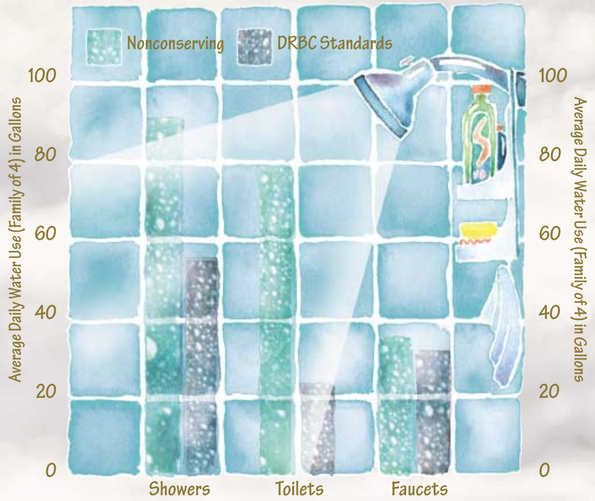
1977 DRBC regulations take effect to restrict development in the 100-year flood plain and prohibit development in the floodway.

1978 Two reaches of the Delaware River totalling 107 miles are added to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The DRBC helps draft the enabling federal legislation.



A Water Quality Success Story

The DRBC's wasteload allocation program and upgrades at riverbank wastewater treatment plants have resulted in dramatic declines in fecal coliform levels and significant increases in dissolved oxygen (DO) levels in the tidal Delaware River. Dissolved oxygen is a critical element for a healthy aquatic environment. High levels of fecal coliform indicate the possible presence of harmful bacteria in a water body. The data in the chart above were generated from sampling on the Delaware River off Philadelphia during the summer months.



Water Conservation—Investing for the Future

About two-thirds of interior residential water use is for bathing and toilet flushing. Savings realized through the installation of water-saving fixtures and fittings, like those required by the Delaware River Basin Commission, are depicted here. At the forefront of the national movement to cut down on the demand side of water supply, the Commission's conservation program is an integral component of its strategy to wisely manage the waters in the four-state river basin. The program has resulted in significant cost savings, environmental protection, and improved drought preparedness.

Lower Delaware: Stephen C. Delaney, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

The DRBC's framework for regional coordination under the federal–interstate compact mechanism appears unrivaled by any existing or proposed institutional arrangement.

1982—*Western Governors' Association Report*

1981 The Level B Study, part of a planning process to guide the Commission in reformulating its long-range master plan in view of the Tocks Island decision, is released. Water conservation is a keystone of the program, which also recommends enlarging existing reservoirs to bolster water supply storage.

1981 Fred Lewis, who operates the only commercial shad fishery on the non-tidal Delaware River, nets 6,392 shad—the biggest catch since 1896. The return of this popular game fish is linked directly to water quality improvement.

1983 After four years of intense deliberations, the Interstate Water Management ("Good Faith") Report is approved. It makes mid-course corrections to the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decree that apportioned the waters of the Delaware, and lays the framework for a drought operating plan. The plan is used successfully during two water supply emergencies in the 1980s.

1985 The DRBC adopts a basinwide well registration program, an integral component of its rapidly expanding ground-water management campaign.

1985 Construction begins on Merrill Creek Reservoir, designed to provide make-up water for riverbank electric generating plants during low-flow conditions on the Delaware. The Commission directed in-basin electrical utilities to build the $217 million impoundment or face cutbacks during droughts. It became operational in 1988.

1986 The Commission's water conservation program hits full stride with adoption of regulations requiring the source metering of large water withdrawals. In the next six years the adoption of additional regulations and programs establish the DRBC as an international leader in the water conservation arena.

1987 Over 56,000 Delaware River shad are landed during a nine-week period between Hancock, N.Y., and Yardley, Pa., generating an estimated $1.6 million in recreational dollars.

1988 The Delaware Bay and tidal reach of the Delaware River are added to the National Estuary Program, a project set up to protect estuarine systems of national significance.

1989 The DRBC launches its Delaware Estuary Toxics Management Program to develop ways to control the discharge of substances from wastewater treatment plants that are toxic to humans and aquatic life in the tidal portions of the Delaware.

1992 The DRBC adopts special regulations to protect the high water quality of the Delaware's "Scenic River" reaches.

1993 Working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the DRBC completes flood-stage forecast mapping for a 65-mile reach of the Delaware River from Belvidere, N.J., downstream to Trenton.

1995 A DRBC-sponsored project designed to prevent or reduce Delaware River flooding in the Port Jervis, N.Y., area is completed.

1995 As it has for nearly four decades, the Commission plays host to foreign delegations as part of an informal program to help friends overseas solve water-related problems. Delegations from more than 20 nations have toured the basin and visited the DRBC's offices over the years.

1995 Over a half million shad swim up the Delaware to spawn.

1996 The DRBC turns 35 and establishes 23 objectives or goals to be pursued by the commissioners and staff, the result of a "retreat" process to define and develop policy-level strategy for the future.

1996 The DRBC adopts regulations governing the discharge of toxic pollutants from wastewater treatment plants to the tidal Delaware River. Numerous toxic substances, some carcinogenic, are covered under the new rules.

1998 Regulations to protect limited ground-water resources in heavily populated portions of southeastern Pennsylvania are adopted by the Commission.

1998 Carol R. Collier is sworn in as the Commission's third executive director, becoming the first woman to head an interstate–federal compact agency. She replaces Gerald M. Hansler, who served in the post for 21 years.

Looking back, the DRBC was the vanguard in the Johnny-come-lately march to manage water resources on a watershed basis.

1996—William D. Ruckelshaus, Administrator U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (1970–1973, 1983–1985)