

# **Upstream – Downstream**

## **Voter Perspectives on Clean Waterways**

March 2010

### **Report on Focus Group Research**

Conducted by *ActionMedia* for:

Penn Future

The Ocean Foundation

Keith Campbell Foundation

Curtis & Edith Munson Foundation

Prince Charitable Trusts

William Penn Foundation

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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*It would be safe to say that today before this conversation, none of us today thought about the water.*

—Charlie, Charlottesville

*I live within less than a half a mile of the Susquehanna River. I've lived here all my life and I've seen streams that were behind my house. And there was one that in a sense, disappeared, and the reason that they're gone is because of the mining. Because of the housing and all that kind of stuff. In Susquehanna County the streams haven't changed too much in the last 30 years. That's because they haven't had the influx of the people coming into the city, building houses, and so on.*

—John, Wilkes-Barre

Eight focus groups were conducted with voters who follow the news, from Albemarle and Orange County VA, and from the cities and surrounding areas of Harrisburg, Wilkes-Barre and Lancaster PA. Detail on the 72 participants is attached to this report.

These respondents are men and women, Republican, Democrat and Independent, who respond uniformly and with conviction to the question “Why is our water important?” Water is precious, and essential for life. They believe its condition is threatened, and there may be serious consequences for the economy and for human health. They further agree, across political differences, that government has an obligation to ensure access to safe water, and to prevent its degradation.

The research was conducted on behalf of organizations engaged in public discussion of the 2010 Chesapeake Clean Water Act, to help strengthen and clarify their communications. However, the findings also hold key insights for any advocacy work to protect and restore surface waters, at the local as well as regional levels. Key findings include:

Most people do not think in terms of a “watershed”, and most do not know what a watershed is. They know that the streams and rivers get dirtier as they move from mountains or springs toward the ocean, but do not assume that conditions in the Chesapeake Bay are necessarily the result of decisions made upstream.

The effect of water pollution on human health is a significant concern, and respondents believe health is threatened by current conditions. They further believe that concerns about future scarcity of potable water are not unfounded, and find it plausible that water will become a more and more contested and precious resource.

Development and changes in the landscape are understood to affect water quality, but as an episodic problem, rather than a continuous and cumulative one. Respondents can explain how, when trees are cut down and open land is paved, it affects the river. But they don't know and never think about what happens to the rain when it falls on their property and community.

Respondents express a desire for knowledge – about the actual condition of local waters, and about solutions to prevent future degradation of the water. They are very responsive to the concept of buffers (a word unknown to almost all) and to the idea that everyone, from individual homeowners to builders, industry and farmers, can take practical steps to protect the waters.

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We use well water now, and our well water is tested twice a year because we have a chicken house and it has to be tested for them. There are a lot of uses for water, and now they're using for the golf courses and stuff like that.

Farming, you will not find them using too much water because of the Chesapeake Bay. They're really pushing to push the farmers out of Lancaster County. They're blaming us for the pollution runoff and everything like that, but if they would go to the homeowners and look how many chemicals they put on their lawns, I think they'd be singing a different story.

— Chris H., Lancaster

They believe “the farmer” is unfairly blamed for water pollution, but recognize that agriculture is more concentrated than in past generations, and that issues of scale create new problems for maintaining water quality.

If the issue is framed in terms of government regulation, it immediately raises doubt about the effectiveness and fairness of “government” in the abstract. However, respondents believe that the water belongs to everyone; that everyone is responsible for maintaining water quality; and that government is a necessary instrument to enable individuals, businesses and communities to fulfill that responsibility, and to take action when someone evades or disregards it.

**Recommendations for talking about the 2010 Chesapeake Clean Water Act include the following:**

Continue with and strengthen local base, for local choices affecting local waterways. Do not use the concept of a “watershed” to explain the issue.

Emphasize drinking water and human health impacts of continuing degradation, including costs of water treatment.

Be explicit about the need to secure our farms, and the opportunity and ability of farmers to maintain our shared water and soil resources. Provide specific, graphic information about issues and consequences of scale, but do not make agriculture the center piece of the need for the bill.

Describe the problem, to be solved by the bill, as run-off carrying pollution into the water: run-off from cities and towns, and from individual properties: malls, industrial parks, highways, farms.

Be explicit about the role of Federal government, to provide resources, ensure fairness and consistency, and hold accountable those who evade their responsibility. Be explicit about the shared role of everyone in the community, to protect the resource and to make conscious choices to do so.

## THE WATER AND THE WATERSHED

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A pre-session survey of participants asked “Do you live in a watershed? If so, what is its name? When it rains where you live, where does the water go?” Of 72 respondents, only 16 men and 4 women answered Yes. Those who knew they lived in a watershed wrote that the rain goes to a stream, river or Chesapeake Bay. All others answered, “soaks into ground, into my basement, into a drain.”

*I work in Annapolis. It's disgusting, the Bay is disgusting. I work for the fire department and we have divers because of the Bay and it's like swimming in the dark room. It's disgusting. And they said that it's gotten better than it was. I'm only 24 and I see that as swimming in a dark hole. But I don't know how it could have gotten better. I don't know what worse it could have been.*

— Justin, Harrisburg

*Q: So, would you conclude that it gets worse between here and there?*

*I'm not sure if it gets worse. It's just...it's that bad down there because of the refineries and what's down there.*

— Justin, Harrisburg

These findings are consistent with previous surveys that show more than 2/3 of adults don't know if they live in a watershed. The term watershed, while a technically accurate descriptor, is problematic to effective and successful communication about surface water issues.

Despite this lack of understanding of the term watershed, it is evident that virtually all the respondents have a good grasp of the “upstream-downstream” nature of surface waters. They all know and can talk about water flowing from a source, such as a spring or the mountains, through a network of streams and rivers that get larger as they roll along to the sea – and many know the Susquehanna and James Rivers flow to Chesapeake Bay. They all know that as the water flows it picks up stuff on the way, and that specific events – a spill, a new development, loss of filtration due to paving – will affect the water.

The problem is not merely that they don't know the meaning of the word watershed, but that they don't understand the underlying concept. Respondents do NOT think of the land and the water as being parts of a single system. “Watershed” makes people think of the water they can see, rivers and tributaries. But it does not link to the relationship of land and water. It's the river and stream that are in the watershed, not me, not the land. That's why they don't think of themselves as living in a watershed, despite understanding that the river flows downstream.

**RECOMMENDATION:** It is important to talk about rain falling on the land, and then running over and through the land and into streams. Consistently provide mental pictures of water being used on the land and returned to the river, and of land uses that protect or degrade the water.

## WATER QUALITY

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(In Harrisburg)

*Q. Has the water changed over your lifetime?*

*Terri: I think the Susquehanna River has because these towns that sit along it have put in sewage systems which prevents all the sewage water from going into the river. It used to be really a sewer pit when we were kids. You could just see stuff floating that you don't want to talk about but they've all put in the sewage systems to try and clean up the water.*

*Q: So, it's cleaner.*

*Terri: Yes.*

*Kathy: I know in the past year, I don't know, two or three, the fish, the bass, did get a disease. I never remembered that as a kid but I don't know, it was stuff that didn't occur.*

Asked about water quality, respondents start with visual descriptions of trash - tires, bottles, refuse. Water quality is equated with water clarity, and evokes examples of muddy water. Mining is understood to pollute water, and that is most often characterized by respondents as producing orange, yellow or red coloration of water, rocks and shore lands. Smell is also noted in some areas near slaughter houses, sewage plants, etc.

It is difficult for respondents to answer the question, “*Over-all, have the rivers and streams gotten better or worse over your or your parents’ memories?*” Although some are certain they are more polluted, all acknowledge that increased awareness and oversight over the past two generations has led to less pollution (Lake Erie and the Cuyahoga River were cited as extreme examples.) They believe regulation has had a positive effect. They also believe conditions get worse and better depending on rainfall, new activity, and episodic alerts, such as public health warnings against swimming at City Island in Harrisburg because of E coli.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Find ways to localize information about water quality in sections of rivers and streams, and provide updated information about degradations and improvements.

Seasonal flooding was mentioned in every group (in part because it was going on at the time of the research in every area following recent late winter storms.) Many people suffer flooded basements, periodic house flooding and concerns about flood water contamination of water supplies. Floods are also cited as causing significant damage to stream and river banks, carrying mud, waste, trash and pollution into the river.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Prominently describe flood control and abatement as part of the safety and security of our local waters. Be explicit about storm water controls and other measures, and about land use decisions, that can reduce damage and property loss. Opportunities for communication of these benefits are especially timely after every flood.

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Many respondents think first of an outlet pipe when they visualize water pollution. Most respondents are inclined to guess that industry is probably the biggest polluter. More informed members of each group point out, to the agreement of the rest, that industry is closely regulated and has made positive changes in the past several decades. Every respondent can give examples of water improvement in specific situations. Respondents feel companies both large and small should be held accountable, but worry that large companies can buy their way out, and that big companies will pay fines as a cost of business.

## MINING

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*Most of my relatives worked in mines for years and years and years and I've seen what that does to creeks. I mean I've seen what kind of destruction around the runoff creeks and it's awful.*

— Andrew, Harrisburg

*And we got several red creeks. They've been calling them red creeks within the state, in the mid-state up north of us, but they are here because they've shown them on the news and I've actually seen several of them because I travel upstate a lot and they're red... everything is dead, everything in the creeks and around them.*

— Michael

Pennsylvania and Virginia residents are well aware of the pollution legacy of mining. They talk about mine disasters and accidents that have affected the water. Many have seen fish kills and habitat destruction. Many have firsthand experience with water polluted by mine drainage. They believe mining did a great deal of lasting damage.

## HEALTH AND SAFETY

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The most compelling argument to protect water is based in health and safety. No other value -- recreational, ecological, spiritual, or stewardship for future generations -- gets people as deeply engaged or speaking from as strongly held convictions.

Respondents are concerned that their water may not be safe to drink. All groups expressed strong concerns about chemical, bacterial and pharmaceutical pollution. Respondents believe the safety of water, especially (but not exclusively) drinking water, is under serious threat or has been significantly compromised. Respondents know that in many local fishing areas the public is warned not to eat the fish, and they think that is a bad condition. E coli outbreaks publicized because of beach closings on City Island in the Susquehanna, were mentioned by respondents in Harrisburg and Lancaster. Most people said they had read or heard of the growing problem with pharmaceutical pollution. No one connected it to the use of drugs in agriculture, or appeared to be thinking of medicine in human waste – they talked about prescriptions being discarded and flushed down the drain.

Groups in Wilkes-Barre, Lancaster and Charlottesville raised the issue of cancer, often in terms of describing the area as having exceptionally high rates of cancer – respondents ask “where is it coming from?” They believe it plausibly comes from the water, though they offered no firm knowledge that the water was actually involved. Many respondents say they only drink bottled water, for reasons of taste as well as health.

There is a general concern that water is or could easily become unsafe to drink. The Haiti earthquake had occurred a few days earlier and every group pointed to the immediate crisis that lack of clean water generated for the survivors.

Water scarcity is also on the minds of many respondents. In Virginia in particular, recent droughts had people rationing water and created first hand experiences with scarcity. They cite on-going development as increasing the pressure on water use, and question whether this has been fully considered in approval of development projects. Nearly everyone believes that water security is uncertain – we could find water becoming a scarce commodity, globally, nationally and locally.

*I think it's what you don't see that you have to really worry about. If it's muddy you know that that's mud, but those chemicals that are floating by in nice clear water, I wouldn't put my body in it. And I wouldn't have let my kids get in to any of the bodies of water. I just think we're inundated with chemicals now.*

— Marguerite, Lancaster

*I got a letter in the mail from the Water Company, I'm on town water. The letter said, use of this water for a long period of time could cause cancer. After they treat it here in Orange County. It said it is a reaction between two chemicals they use to treat that water. No need to say, we're drinking bottled water now and put in a filter that we use on our water system.*

— Don, Charlottesville

Several respondents use well water, and they spoke about being very careful about application of fertilizers or pesticides for fear of contaminating their well. The consumer use of fertilizer and pesticides is widely recognized as a problem, and one respondent suggested that, if people responded to lush green lawns as signs of water pollution, property owners would quit using fertilizer.

Respondents are aware that they pay the costs of water treatment, and believe it is better, cheaper and easier to keep water clean than it is to clean it up. Respondents were told that the City of Philadelphia found that for every dollar invested in run-off prevention, they saved \$27 in treatment costs. This makes sense to respondents, recognizing that the exact ratio may vary place to place but the equation will always favor prevention. Several respondents did note, however, that they are not likely to see any actual reduction in their water bill as a result of the savings.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Make human health and safety the fundamental value associated with surface water restoration and pollution control. Be explicit about drinking water, downstream as well as locally, and about the technical limits and financial consequences of water treatment. This creates a major opportunity for discussion of nutrient trading, and the ability of farmers to help urban taxpayers protect their drinking water and hold down their costs.

## DEVELOPMENT & RUN-OFF

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Most people have a clear picture of storm water run-off problems. It is one of the first causes volunteered when asked about pollution. They also understand that buildings, parking lots, roads, even “paving stones” are surfaces that prevent water from entering the soil, leading to increased amounts of run-off. Respondents recognize that oil, antifreeze, leaves and other litter is carried by the run-off into streams. Across levels of education and political orientations, all believe that new development and land clearing creates run-off problems including erosion, dirty water, and changes in local streams, wetlands or springs. They talk about catchment ponds near large developments and the type of pollution they see there.

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*Anytime there's a new development, I mean ...all of that disturbing the earth and taking the natural system that holds the earth in place which would be vegetation, there's always an effect somewhere. I mean it just has to. When Walmart and Kegler's and all that was being built, we noticed a change in the water a quarter of a mile down the road and across the road, and that's certainly visible at that Target drainage pond, that's hideous.*

— Virginia, Charlottesville

*You just have huge, huge expanses of row homes or block homes or town homes or whatever. You know, they're going up at lightning paces and how is that going to really affect our water table? Eventually, that's going to really affect the entire ecosystem as a whole.*

— Andrew, Harrisburg

Run-off is the term respondents use. They don't talk about storm water. Storm water is a technical term and in part refers to infrastructure --part of a system that is often separate from the handling of sewage. "Storm water" easily set-ups a mental image of an event, or incident; it does not get to the on-going and cumulative effect of run-off. Technically storm water may describe run-off from a gentle spring rain, but it creates the wrong picture for most people.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Use the term run-off rather than storm water. Run-off from our lawns, streets, parking lots, farms and roof-tops. Stop using "storm water" whenever possible.

In the context of the discussion on run-off, participants were asked if they had heard of "buffers" or "buffer strips." Very few knew the term. Those who did know were asked to explain what a buffer is, and they did well explaining it as trees and plants that soak up water and slow down run-off. In all groups, at least one respondent used the word "filter" or described that process. Once the concept was explained, respondents were uniformly supportive of the idea because they could all see its positive impact on water.

Although very few respondents were familiar with buffers, a quick explanation helped them make the connection between what happens on the land and the condition of water. Asked if they felt new development projects should be required to establish buffers, the groups were unanimously in favor. They were less supportive of asking existing property owners to install buffers -- the key issues being cost, who pays, and to some degree, property rights. Some point out that a full system of buffers along streams might take too much farm acreage out of production, causing permanent loss of income over and above the cost of planting the buffer. But for new development, they see proper buffers as a cost of the project that should be included in the overall price of the development.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Talk about planting trees and vegetation to filter the water and slow erosion – not about "buffers". Use the natural filtration process of water and soil as a central theme in describing why land use, and what happens when it rains, affects the quality and safety of the water.

## DON'T BLAME THE FARMER

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*When you say farmers, I'm going to assume that you're taking in the big circle, agriculture itself---so when you say that, I have to look at industries like chicken, people who raise chickens and hogs and what they do with the waste. Which is top secret unless you're actually on a hog ranch or someplace like Perdue who raises all these chickens so, there we go.*

*So, there are some things that are accounted for until they get caught and something explodes. Right now we're just concerned about how they raise them and the quality of food that comes out. But, what does happen to the waste products, the byproducts that they derive from raising chickens, cows, and whatever?*

*— William, Charlottesville*

Respondents reconfirmed what earlier research indicated: “farmers” are believed to be good stewards of natural resources. In Lancaster County, one respondent mentioned the Amish as using “more organic methods than a typical farmer or some of the industrial farms in the Midwest”. Farmers, like hunters and fishermen, are assumed to have good working knowledge of the natural environment, and a direct interest in maintaining its balance.

Farmers are also perceived to be hard-pressed business people, trying to hold on in an increasingly competitive environment, and respondents are quick to point that everyone is dependent on them for growing food. Stable farms are also understood to be a better land use than unchecked development.

In the two groups, Lancaster and Albemarle Counties, that included a farmer, there was respect and a significant degree of agreement from the group to the farmers’ statements that farms are not the biggest problems, and that farmers are unfairly blamed.

This was echoed in all groups. However, once any respondent made reference to issues of scale, the group agreed that agricultural operations at today’s unprecedented scale require new attention to run-off. Even one farmer, who was vociferous in early expression of being unfairly blamed for water problems, left the discussion saying, now that she’d spent time thinking about water quality, she was going to make sure to keep up to date on her nutrient management plans.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Because Agriculture is the most organized and most visible opposition to legislation, advocacy efforts are aimed at countering them. However, respondents believe that urban runoff is more of a problem. Consequently, the pollution that must be stopped should be described as entering our waterways as run-off from cities, towns and farms, placing farms in the context of the full story.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Be specific about different kinds of agricultural operations, and graphic in describing concentrated animal operations. Emphasize that farmers want to protect the water and soil, and that they must be paid for work they do to achieve this.

## **RESPONSIBILITY, GOVERNMENT ROLE, AND CITIZEN ADVOCACY**

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*In Lancaster:*

*Chris H. (R): Anything you put in the government hands is going to get screwed up.*

*Karen (R): Cost twice as much. They'll hire this firm, this consultant at \$60,000 to check --it's waste.*

*Chris H.: Just use your common sense.*

*Karen: Although ... (gestures on the other hand), you know, without government?*

*Ellie (D): It's the oversight, there has to be a central oversight. And that's what we have.*

*Kris P. (R): And if we are not willing to take it on ourselves which clearly we aren't, then you're going to have somebody overseeing. I'm not a big fan (of government programs) but in this particular example I'm not really sure how else you can do it.*

Because they believe the water belongs to everyone, respondents reason from the premise that “everyone” is responsible for maintaining and protecting it. From this, respondents explain how those who use the water, including themselves, have a responsibility to be aware of their impact on it, and that those who use the most water have the most responsibility. It is self-evident to them that the polluter should pay for costs of clean-up.

In addition, as noted above, respondents believe water quality and environmental protection in general has improved in important ways over time. They attribute this improvement most of all to greater general awareness and knowledge, but recognize that environmental improvements are a function of increased governmental oversight.

Respondents spontaneously and in general agreement disparage “the Government.” It is cited almost universally as inefficient, and often as ineffective and/or unfair. Yet when respondents reason from a story about their water rather than about their government, they are quick to point out – even by the same person, as in the example at the left, from Lancaster – that government serves an important purpose.

Whatever the political orientation of respondents, all agree that, if they knew someone upstream was polluting their water, they would report it to government authority (including state, federal, and local agencies) and would hope (with some doubt) for an appropriate response.

Respondents raise concerns that those with the most money pay too small a fine as a cost of doing business, and they worry that those least able to pay, notably farmers, will bear too great a cost burden. Any proposals relating to accountability for meeting standards must first address these concerns.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The role of government should be described as making sure everyone is playing by the same rules. Don't say “*the government is responsible for protecting the water.*” Everyone who uses water is responsible for maintaining and protecting it. The government is needed when people abuse the water, and in particular must make it possible for individuals, businesses and communities to take necessary actions.

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*There are littering laws. Most people obey them. They don't think, I'm not going to throw the bottle because I'm going to get fined. But they are there. There are laws that regulate our septic systems, you know. You don't intentionally have septic systems that go bad. But they're covered by a building code. The water we get, the well we drill, it has to conform to the building codes. Almost everything you can think of in the use of water is regulated one way or another.*

—Fredrick, Charlottesville

*The minute the community realizes that something is going on to the environment, they need to step up and draw attention to it.*

— Sherri, Charlottesville

Because respondents believe that their own awareness, and by extension the general awareness, is vital to getting results for clean water, any discussion of public policy will be enhanced by the perception that people (including people like themselves) are getting reliable information. What is the condition of our local water, what can be done to reduce pollutants, who can do it and how? Respondents naïvely assume that the most crucial information is about consumer behaviors, but strongly believe that community standards and the expectations of others will provide the greatest impetus for action to protect the waters.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The research strongly indicates that the perception that “people are paying attention to the water” is a vital component of any effort to increase political will. Citizens who might be mobilized need to perceive that information about protecting the water is widely available. This information should include home-owner tips as well as effects of development and run-off, including farm run-off.

Environmental groups and “local watershed associations” are credible messengers for this type of information. Respondents had only positive attitudes toward the efforts of the independent sector. This statement was read to all groups: “*We need real results that clean up our local rivers and streams. We need policies that are fair, and help secure the future of our farms, and improve our local economies. It's unfair for any individual or group to continue to pollute water at everyone else's expense.*”

When attributed to a “local watershed association”, the statement was met with universal approval, though some point out that it's easier to say than to achieve. When attributed to a business owner or elected official, it immediately raised questions about motive: is this just a political sound bite, or what's the speaker really after? However, even this response reflected the fact that respondents found no objection to the premise, and that they wanted to hear what comes next, i.e., how do you achieve it?

**RECOMMENDATION:** Increased visibility of local citizen groups in print, broadcast and online media, and especially recruitment of citizen volunteers as messengers to decision makers, will strengthen popular support for public and private decisions that choose clean water.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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Consistently describe the process of rain falling on the land, and running over and through the land into streams. Provide mental pictures of water being used on the land and returned to the river, and of land uses that protect or degrade the water.

Find ways to localize information about water quality in sections of rivers and streams, and provide updated information about degradations and improvements.

Prominently describe flood control and abatement as part of the safety and security of our local waters. Be explicit about storm water controls and other measures, and about land use decisions, that can reduce damage and property loss. Opportunities for communication of these benefits are especially timely after every flood.

Make human health and safety the fundamental value associated with surface water restoration and pollution control. Be explicit about drinking water, downstream as well as locally, and about the technical limits and financial consequences of water treatment.

When talking about nutrient trading, specify the ability of farmers to help urban taxpayers protect their drinking water sources and hold down their costs.

Talk about planting trees and vegetation to filter the water and slow erosion. Do NOT talk about “buffers”. Use the natural filtration process of water and soil as a central theme in describing why land use affects the quality and safety of the water every time it rains.

Describe the pollution that must be stopped as run-off from cities, towns and farms, placing farms in the context of the full story. Avoid the term *storm water* whenever possible.

Be specific about different kinds of agricultural operations, and graphic in describing concentrated animal operations. Emphasize that farmers want to protect the water and soil, and that they must be paid for work they do to achieve this.

The role of government should be described as making sure everyone is playing by the same rules. Don't say “*the government is responsible for protecting the water.*” Instead say, everyone who uses water is responsible for maintaining and protecting it. The government is needed when people abuse the water, and in particular must make it possible for individuals, businesses and communities to take necessary actions.

The perception that “people are paying attention to the water” is a vital component of any effort to increase political will. Citizens who might be mobilized need to perceive that information about protecting the water is widely available. This information should include home-owner tips as well as effects of development and run-off, including farm run-off.

Increased visibility of local citizen groups in print, broadcast and online media, and especially recruitment of citizen volunteers as messengers to decision makers, will strengthen popular support for public and private decisions that choose clean water.

## RESPONDENTS

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Eight focus groups consisting of nine respondents each were conducted January 2010 in Lancaster, Wilkes-Barre, Harrisburg PA, and Charlottesville VA. In each location, one group was all men, one group all women. Each group included a range of ages, from 24 – 71.

In Harrisburg, Wilkes-Barre and Lancaster, each group included a mix of people living in the city and in surrounding areas. In Charlottesville, all respondents live in rural Albemarle or Orange County, or small towns outside Charlottesville.

All respondents voted in the previous election, and follow the news via at least two outlets. In Harrisburg, respondents were further screened to be *actively engaged* – all actively volunteer in a business or citizen organization, all have donated to or volunteered for election campaigns and all have contacted an elected official or submitted a newspaper letter to editor.

Each group included a mix of political orientation, described as generally voting as Democrats (31), Republicans (30), Independent or None (11).