

THE DAILY RECORD

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Environmental LAW

Genesee RiverWatch seeks to address persistent problems

Over the past decade, concerns about climate change and fracking have dominated public discussion about the environment, tending to overshadow the basic issues which sparked the environmentalist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the quality of our lakes, rivers and streams and the availability of those resources for homes, agriculture, industry and recreation.

However, even though the focus appears to have shifted, those climate change and fracking debates eventually come full circle back to the basic building blocks of water and air — climate change is a priority and a controversial topic in large part due to the predicted effect on the availability of fresh water, and fracking is divisive in large part because of disagreement on whether and to what extent water resources will be degraded.

Western New Yorkers are fortunate to have water resources in abundance, and the discussion about new threats to water quality from climate change and fracking are necessary. However, despite 40 years of environmental regulation, it is surprising that one of the most obvious freshwater resources in the region, the Genesee River and its watershed, is still impaired and much less inviting or accessible than it could be.

Although some of the river's impacts on Lake Ontario are obvious and frustrating, with the frequent closings of beaches during the summer, the causes of that pollution have been assumed, but not really studied, and no one has really been able to coordinate resources and address problems from the perspective of protecting the entire watershed.

The Hudson, Niagara and other rivers have had advocates for decades, but somehow the Genesee has gone without a unifying voice. To be sure, governments and many organizations have played prominent roles, but significant problems with water quality have persisted.

The information gap has been closed significantly by the Genesee River Watershed Project, a study recently completed by

SUNY Brockport. At the same time, the Center for Environmental Initiatives, an environmental organization with a 40-year history, has launched a new effort, The Genesee RiverWatch, to bring greater attention to the problems in the river and to advocate for solutions throughout the watershed to improve water quality along its entire length.

The Genesee RiverWatch convened the Genesee River Basin Summit on Feb. 6 at the mouth of the river in Charlotte, which provided a forum for presentation of the findings of the Watershed Project and an opportunity for individuals, groups and governments from the entire watershed to discuss how to use SUNY Brockport's conclusions to target sources of pollutants to improve water quality.

The summit identified projects along the upper Genesee between Filmore and Belmont, along Canaseraga Creek, and along Honeoye Creek to begin the effort to reduce discharges of phosphorus and sediment, the two most significant problems in the Genesee River. CEI plans to use the Genesee RiverWatch to coordinate

those projects and seek out sources of funding.

Since improved water quality will enhance the appearance and recreational uses of Monroe County's beaches and the Genesee itself, fueling economic development, the Empire State Development Corporation participated in the summit with suggestions for access to funding through the regional economic councils.

Of course, recognition of the Genesee River as an underutilized economic resource that can spur economic development if better protected must be reconciled with other, more immediate job creators, such as the expanding yogurt industry. The yogurt boom has led the state to encourage the expansion of dairy herds by raising the threshold before environmental regulations apply, which may result in increased phosphorous and sediment in the river from expanded dairy farming. It is not difficult to foresee that this tension could lead to confrontation.

How all of this will involve the legal community and the pub-

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By **RONALD G. HULL**

Daily Record
Columnist

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lic at large remains to be seen. The Genesee RiverWatch proposes to advocate through collaboration rather than litigation. Is the general public concerned enough about beach closings, smelly algae and the lack of recreational access to the Genesee River, that public opinion and financial support will flow to RiverWatch and its projects?

The Genesee River Basin Summit has drawn attention both to the problem and to SUNY Brockport's comprehensive investigation, so the fledgling initiative appears to be off to a solid start.

Ronald G. Hull is a senior attorney in Underberg & Kessler LLP's Environmental and Litigation practice groups. He has more than 25 years' experience in the areas of environmental and municipal law and litigation.