

THE BEGINNING OF BERKS COUNTY'S **Source Water Protection Program**

The following is a Q&A with community leaders integral in the development of the Berks County Source Water Protection program. The Berks County SWP (SWP) program is a subcommittee of the Berks County Water & Sewer Association (BCW&SA), sponsored by Albright College's Center for Excellence in Local Government (CELG). The program is a collaboration of community water systems, conservation partners and local government. The mission of the Berks County SWP program is to support and maintain the high quality of drinking water in the county today and into the future. The Berks County SWP program was the recipient of a 2018 Governors Award for Environmental Excellence. To date, the Berks County SWP program includes 30 community water systems that provide service to over 266,000 Berks County residents.

Q: When did the idea of countywide source water protection develop?

Dale Kratzer (*Spotts, Stevens and McCoy, Retired*) – Source Water Protection in Berks County goes back to 1992 when the EPA contracted Kutztown and in turn SSM to complete assessments for Kutztown, Topton and Lyon Boroughs. The genesis for countywide SWP was the development of the County's Sewer and Water Regionalization Study for Small Systems in 1998. Recommendations from the updated 1998 County Sewer and Water Regionalization Study influenced the Berks County Planning Commission to support the formation of the Berks County Water and Sewer Association. The topic of the first BCW&SA conference in 2013 was "Source Water Protection."

Ashley Showers (*Berks County Planning Commission, Assistant Director*) – The update to the county's Sewer and Water Regionalization Study was really pushed by local water providers like Reading Area Water Authority and Western Berks Water Authority. At the same time, the EPA, PA DEP and the Philadelphia Water Department were organizing the Schuylkill Action Network (SAN). The formation of SAN put drinking water suppliers and conservation organizations in the same room. The "One Water" approach linked SWP, stormwater and waste water together, and within the past five years, the connection between Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems (MS4) [stormwater] and SWP has been emphasized.

Joe Hebelka (*PADEP, Bureau of Safe Drinking Water*) – PA DEP administers the Source Water Protection Technical Assistance Program (SWPTAP) which funds the development of source water protection plans for community public water suppliers. Many of the large to medium drinking water supplies in Berks County took advantage of the SWPTAP funding. PADEP supports and encourages collaboration between drinking water suppliers, conservation partners and the public. If it wasn't for the partnerships, the Berks County SWP program would not have happened.

Q: Who were the key players in developing the Berks County Source Water Protection program?

Lyn O'Hare (*Spotts, Stevens and McCoy, Project Manager*) – Dale Kratzer really moved the concept of a countywide SWP plan forward, along with the Planning Commission, Berks Nature and BCW&SA. The CELG sponsored the BCW&SA and provided the SWP committee with a home.

Joe Hebelka (*PADEP, Bureau of Safe Drinking Water*) – The Philadelphia Water Department really pushed the development of the SAN, and that generated the network of partners that would later become the base of the BCW&SA, and that included the Berks County Planning Commission, and water suppliers like RAWA and WBWA.

Q: What was the goal of developing a County Source Water Protection program?

Chip Bilger (*Western Berks Water Authority, Executive Director & BCWSA Chair*) – From a water provider's perspective, the goal was to eliminate duplication of effort and fill the gaps where there wasn't SWP coverage. The better the raw water coming in, the easier it is to treat. Clean source water has a huge impact on the treatment process.

Ashley Showers (*Berks County Planning Commission, Assistant Director*) – With the combination of aging infrastructure, land use impacts and stronger permit requirements being ushered in for drinking water, stormwater and waste water; the goal to have a united stance to work collaboratively and provide more weight to deal with these impacts was necessary.

Lyn O'Hare (*Spotts, Stevens and McCoy, Project Manager*) – The county SWP program was a way to encourage community water systems to update their SWP areas through SWPTAP funding. It was also a way to connect the different uses of water including waste water, MS4 [stormwater] and source water protection.

Q: What issues did the County Source Water Protection program encounter during development?

Chip Bilger (*Western Berks Water Authority, Executive Director & BCWSA Chair*) – Source water protection is voluntary for a drinking water supplier and it's difficult to spend extra time on planning when most of your time is committed to daily operations and maintaining compliance. It was difficult for some systems to see the value in the SWPTAP and SWP programs.

Dale Kratzer (*Spotts, Stevens and McCoy, Retired*) – Inertia. Systems weren't opposed to the idea, but slow to react. Certain businesses within the source water protection areas were initially opposed or skeptical of the idea, but were invited to participate in the planning process, and that has worked out well.

Q: What is the greatest achievement of the County Source Water Protection program?

Lyn O'Hare (*Spotts, Stevens and McCoy, Project Manager*) – The county SWP program is the first of its kind and to have drinking water systems participation is innovative. It has brought awareness to issues that can harm drinking water sources and that there are many other partners in the county and region that can share information and resources to address those issues.

Chip Bilger (*Western Berks Water Authority, Executive Director & BCWSA Chair*) – The county SWP program has been very successful in developing partnerships within the County and outside the County, with groups like the PADEP, EPA, Schuylkill Action Network and the Philadelphia Water Department.

Dale Kratzer (*SSM Group, Inc., Retired*) – The cooperation from partners to implementing countywide SWP was significant. Berks County is still looked at by the state, if not the entire region, as a model for countywide SWP.

Q: What are the challenges and opportunities for Source Water Protection in Berks County.

Chip Bilger (*Western Berks Water Authority, Executive Director & BCWSA Chair*) – Buy in from systems that are not fully involved or see the value in the program, as well as, agricultural runoff that feed Harmful Algae Blooms (HAB) and how we react to emerging contaminants like PFOA and PFOS compounds is challenging. The biggest opportunity for a water supplier is that the county SWP program provides us with a tool to talk to upstream landowners and communities about how to protect water resources.

Joe Hebelka (*PADEP, Bureau of Safe Drinking Water*) – It's challenging to maintain interest and engagement as time moves forward and you have turnover. The Berks County SWP Program was this confluence of ideas between county initiatives like BCW&SA, the great partnerships of SAN, and SWPTAP funding coming together. The program initially got the low hanging fruit, and there are more water suppliers to get.

Ashley Showers (*Berks County Planning Commission, Assistant Director*) – The future challenge is getting the public involved and participating in source water protection. The future opportunities are that clean water sources draw in economic development. Communities and businesses want and need clean water.

Dale Kratzer (*SSM Group, Inc., Retired*) – Keeping the public informed and interested in the positive change of SWP is a challenge. SWP is not mandatory and community water system can opt out of it. If we prevent something from happening, we'll know how to treat it. If something happens, we have been forewarned and can react to it.

For more information on the Berks County Water and Sewer Association, please visit www.albright.edu/localgov or contact Andrea Weist @aweist@albright.edu; for information on the Berks County SWP program, visit www.co.berks.pa.us/dept/planning.com or contact Berks County SWP program coordinator, Kent Himelright, at kent.himelright@berkscd.com. The Berks County SWP program committee hosts quarterly meetings on the third Thursday of every month.