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STEWARDSHIP OF LOUISIANA'S COMMUNITY WATERS: THE EZEKIEL 34 INITIATIVE

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Is it not enough for you to drink clear water?

Must you muddy the rest with your feet?

Ezekiel 34: 17-18

Introduction

If there is one problem Louisiana should not have, it is a shortage of good, clear water. Indeed, it seems as if water is everywhere. We are blessed with abundant waters that should be viewed as a community resource, arguably our most precious community resource. Our aquifers are the primary drinking water source for most non-coastal communities in the state, while our surface waters, especially the Mississippi River and its distributaries, are the primary drinking water sources for most coastal communities. These waters are also critical to agriculture, industry, recreation, public health and wildlife. Water is becoming an economic resource as valuable as natural gas and oil, and as transportable as those resources. Predictable supplies of available potable water, just as predictable supplies of energy, are key to a community's economic survival.

Yet over the past several years we have discovered the supply of ground water is not endless; significant areas of some of our state aquifers are being depleted through overuse. Moreover, due to insufficient regulation of water quality, both ground and surface waters are increasingly polluted. In some coastal areas, surface waters that people depend on for drinking are now threatened by saltwater contamination resulting from coastal erosion, rising sea levels, and a sinking delta. Louisiana does have a comprehensive coastal restoration plan, but it does not have the funding needed for its implementation.

In spite of the importance of clean, safe, and continually abundant water sources, Louisiana has no ground water regulations. Water in Louisiana is currently subject to the rule of capture under which a person owns as much water as he or she can get from wells on their property. Louisiana, therefore, has neither laws governing groundwater usage within the state nor laws preventing our community waters from being sold by individuals or corporations to other southern and western states where economic growth is already being severely handicapped by diminishing water supplies. Compounding the problem, Louisiana has no

comprehensive, affordable program to certify well water as safe for drinking, and no statewide monitoring program to certify water as safe for swimming, fishing, or other designated uses.

Louisiana's Governor and legislature are now, in the spring of 2003, for the first time considering legislation creating a comprehensive statewide water policy. A national campaign to secure coastal restoration funding will be launched in 2004.

Background

The stewardship of Louisiana's community waters has been targeted over the past two years by religious congregations throughout the state, under the leadership of the Commission on Stewardship of the Environment of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference (LIC). The passage of a comprehensive statewide water policy in the spring of 2003 is a major part of this effort.

This effort began in 2001 with "Stewardship of Louisiana's Community Waters", a series of workshops designed and implemented by the Commission. Between January and March 2001, over 450 people attended these workshops around the state in churches in Lafayette, West Monroe, Larose, and Baton Rouge. Presentations by scientists, elected officials, agency experts, and clergy explained the sources of our drinking water and the nature of current and potential water crises.

Following the workshops, the Commission issued press releases to newspapers statewide and sent letters during the 2001 legislative session to each Representative and Senator, as well as the Governor, with our recommendations for a comprehensive water policy. In response to demonstrated public interest, the legislature passed a bill to create a Ground Water Management Advisory Task Force in the Governor's Office. The Commission on Stewardship of the Environment is on the Task Force Outreach Committee and has attended monthly task force and committee meetings throughout 2002 and into early 2003. This Task Force presented a comprehensive statewide water management plan to the Legislature in January 2003.ⁱ The Commission is now working for the enactment of this plan.

Ezekiel 34 Initiative

To organize an advocacy effort among Louisiana's religious congregations, the Commission developed the Ezekiel 34 Initiative. The Ezekiel 34 Initiative offers four moral guidelines for legislative debate; important points to be included in any water policy legislation; suggestions for religious congregations interested in creating local stewardship commissions; and a call for religious congregations, acting prophetically, to call upon the Governor and Legislature to enact water policy legislation based on the principles of stewardship. Ezekiel 34 Initiative brochures have been sent to the mailing list developed during the 2001 forums; to the LIC members for distribution to their congregations; to other churches, synagogues, mosques and other faith communities; and to the Governor and Legislature. The brochures feature a response card allowing interested congregations to request a 20-page organizing kit developed by the Commission.ⁱⁱ Finally, commission members are meeting one-on-one with religious leaders throughout the state to promote the initiative.

Our specific message about legislation is based on four moral guidelines for the stewardship of Louisiana's community waters:

- The resources and creatures of the Earth may be understood as signs of God's presence and blessings upon us.
- Humans are called to remember our covenantal relationship with God and all creation.
- God calls upon humankind to act as stewards of creation.
- Biblical faith teaches that we are to love our neighbor, which includes the "least of these," meaning the poor, children, strangers, and all those without an influential voice in society.

Key points to be included in any legislation are as follows:

- Declare safe, clean drinking water the highest priority for individual health and community economic survival.
- Create a Water Management Commission with an office and staff within state government to develop a coordinated plan for the protection and enhancement of Louisiana's ground and surface waters. The Commission must provide for local input into water decisions.
- Water management and planning should include all aspects of both groundwater and surface water.
- Test, register or permit wells based on the amount of water capable of being pumped daily.
- Develop rules and regulations defining critical groundwater and surface water areas.
- Register or permit new wells to limit withdrawal from critical groundwater areas, or to protect the sustainability of groundwater resources. Institute penalties for violations.
- Develop rules and regulations, with penalties for violations, to prevent the contamination of groundwater recharge areas and surface waters used for drinking. Develop incentives to encourage water stewardship.
- Implement a public outreach and education program.
- Work toward full funding and implementation of the state's coastal restoration plan, recognizing the functions of wetlands to purify water, recharge aquifers, and protect against salt water intrusion.
- Test all drinking water wells for safety, making individual well testing affordable even to poor people. Certify other state waters as safe for other uses (e.g. recreation) where appropriate.
- Direct the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to clean up water bodies that fail to meet clean water standards for their designated uses. In some cases this will involve interstate compacts and agreements.
- Direct the Department of Natural Resources to restructure fee schedules and to be more selective about siting for deep well injections (of hazardous wastes from many different sources). Louisiana should create a trust fund to be used to clean up contaminated community waters.
- Mitigate, through various types of public support, the impact of water projects on poor people, especially those who will have to relocate homes or jobs (e.g. family fishermen and family farmers).
- Develop programs to ensure that children, especially poor children, have access to safe, clean water and are protected from waterborne diseases and other environmental hazards.

In 2004 the Ezekiel 34 Initiative will shift from groundwater legislation to a focus on surface water concerns. Louisiana is developing a strategy to win authorization of a fourteen billion dollar coastal wetlands protection and restoration program - the Coast 2050 Plan.ⁱⁱⁱ The Commission will work within religious congregations

to promote Coast 2050 as a vehicle for stewardship of state coastal surface waters and to secure the necessary federal funding.

Environmental Stewardship in Louisiana

Prior to the Ezekiel 34 Initiative, religious congregations in Louisiana have played a significant role in stewardship of our waters, wetlands and other natural resources. In 1987, several different religious denominations in Louisiana passed a common resolution that urged the following:

[The] people of Louisiana, particularly those in coastal parishes, [need] to accept personal responsibility for environmental stewardship, to recognize our moral responsibility to learn about coastal restoration efforts, to support groups active in protecting our wetlands, and to elect public officials who are committed to responsible environmental stewardship.

From 1986 - 1989, an *ad hoc* group of religious congregations, called the Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Interfaith Stewardship Initiative, sponsored 20 forums in churches and synagogues throughout coastal Louisiana. The forums attracted over 2,000 people, who learned about ways to protect and restore our wetlands. At the request of state government, these became the first official state public hearings for Louisiana's coastal restoration plan, allowing projects to start a year early, as well as organizing vital grassroots input.

Discussion and debate from a church pew had a very different flavor from public hearings in government agency conference rooms. Over and over again, groups normally opposed to each other were able to focus on consensus, not only because the physical environment in which the discussions were being held had changed, but also because the context had shifted to a discussion centered on the common good and stewardship.

Recognizing the need for even broader outreach, the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana was formed in 1987 to continue to organize the citizens of Louisiana for the protection and restoration of the wetlands. Religious congregations and organizations, including Catholic Social Services, were charter members of the Coalition. The director of Catholic Social Services, in fact, chaired the Coalition for its first three years in order to build trust among a very diverse pool of potential members. Today, with a membership of over 150 businesses, organizations, civic, religious and environmental groups, the Coalition is an effective advocate in Louisiana, as well as a nationally respected nonprofit organization.

Conclusion

Being good stewards not only helps us live out our religious beliefs, it reinforces the practical experience of our daily lives. Here in coastal Louisiana everything from our language to our livelihoods is sustained by wetlands and water. Partnering with religious congregations makes good sense not only for the stewardship values which we hold, but also for the organizing in which we engage.



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EndNotes

ⁱ Louisiana Groundwater Management Commission, www.la-water.com

ⁱⁱ Ezekiel 34 Initiative, rgorman@htdiocese.org, Commission on Stewardship of the Environment, Houma, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ America's Wetland Campaign, www.americaswetland.com, State of Louisiana, 2001.