Water Matters – July 2009
New State Stormwater Regulations

One afternoon this spring while out for a walk on the greenway in Luray, I was caught in a huge downpour. I took shelter where the path crosses under the Main Street Bridge. Not surprisingly, shortly after the rain started, a torrent of cloudy water began pouring from the stormdrain pipes under the bridge and into Hawksbill Creek.

There's hardly anything worse for trout (and most everything else that lives in our streams) than the flash of hot dirty water that comes off of streets and buildings after a rainstorm. This urban and suburban runoff, known as stormwater, is the fastest growing source of water pollution in our region.

Fortunately, Virginia has proposed new rules to address the effects of stormwater runoff. The proposed regulations, developed over the past three years by the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), represent a vast improvement over the existing program. Representatives from local government, engineers, economists, homebuilders, and researchers from Virginia Tech and the Center for Watershed Protection provided technical input to the program, which provides flexible, efficient ways for developers to meet the new standards.

This is a great opportunity for the development community to join with farmers, industry, and local governments in taking steps to clean up local streams and rivers. In recent years, hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars have gone to reduce water pollution from sewage treatment plants. Likewise, farmers are making good progress in reducing agricultural runoff. Despite these advances, water quality in many streams and rivers continues to decline because runoff from developed land is getting worse.

Polluted runoff after storms is not just an environmental problem; it's also an economic problem, causing the loss of revenue in recreation and tourism industries, increased costs to provide clean drinking water to the public, and more intensive and damaging floods. Moreover, it is likely that the federal EPA will increase enforcement of the Clean Water Act within the Chesapeake Bay Watershed (which includes Page County) in the near future. If we do not adequately address stormwater runoff in Virginia, it will shift more of the burden to farms and local governments and cost us all more in the long run.

Administration of the stormwater program is designed to be paid for by new development through proposed permit fees, so it is not an unfunded mandate to local governments. Furthermore, under the proposed regulation, Page County would have the option of running its own program, joining with other localities to run a program, or having the Virginia Department Conservation and Recreation run the program.

And DCR is considering a minor tweak to the program, so that development and redevelopment in towns and cities is encouraged over sprawling "greenfields" development in the countryside.

We're all part of the problem when it comes to stormwater runoff. And we all need to be part of the solution. Check out Shenandoah Valley Network's website: www.svnva.org to find out more about the regulations. Or, better yet, log on to Virginia Townhall at www.townhall.virginia.gov to send your public comment in support of the new program directly to the Department of Conservation and Recreation. Comment period is open until August 21st. You can also visit the

Page County Water Quality Advisory Committee booth at the Page Valley Fair for more information.

This is the seventeenth in a series of articles addressing local water issues and was written by Kate Wofford, resident of Luray and executive director of the Shenandoah Valley Network.