



Water Resources Education Network  
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## WREN April 2012 E-NEWS PROFILE FEATURE

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### Profile: The Triple Divide Watershed Coalition: 2012 Winner of PA Governor’s Award for Local Government Excellence 2011-2012 WREN Grantee

By Ellen Kiley and Julie Kollar

Weeks after being applauded as a national model for protection of treasured watersheds, the Triple Divide Watershed Coalition based in Potter County, has been awarded the prestigious Pennsylvania Governor’s Award for Local Government Excellence in the “Building Community Partnerships” category.



*“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.” Henry Ford*

When natural gas companies moved into Potter County in north central Pennsylvania to begin drilling, many residents and officials were in a quandary. The jobs and economic promise of the industry were welcomed. However,

excitement was tempered with concerns about the impacts of industrialization on the county’s rural character, outdoor lifestyle, and threats to local water resources from poorly managed gas development and hydraulic fracturing.

Potter County residents treasure the natural beauty of their county, nicknamed “God’s Country.” Its [tourism association](#) promotes the “untouched, unspoiled, untamed” 1.2 million acres of wilderness, state parks, and 800 miles of quality fishing streams.

Potter County is also the location of a unique geographical feature. It is home to the only triple divide watershed east of the Mississippi. A raindrop might flow north to the Genesee River and the Great Lakes, south to the Allegheny and Ohio River and the Gulf of Mexico, or east to the Atlantic Ocean via the Susquehanna River and the Chesapeake Bay.



Potter had a Natural Gas Task Force in place, but many felt more needed to be done to assure safe drinking water for the 18,000 county residents (8,354 of whom are served by nine public water suppliers), and to maintain sustainable supplies for future generations. A tradition of careful stewardship was nothing new to the water suppliers of Potter County. Due to their efforts over the past decade, they are the first and only county in the Commonwealth to have a 100 percent participation rate with PA DEP-approved source water protection plans in place for all nine systems.

By the time the last Source Water Protection Plan was completed and approved in the County, Mark Stephens, P.G., PA Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Source Water Protection Coordinator for the North Central Region, was very familiar with the area and the people. Mr. Stephens suggested to his individual contacts that there was a great opportunity to work together, to speak with one voice on water quality issues that might otherwise be overlooked in the rush to drill natural gas wells.

After a convening meeting to determine the level of interest, the group of motivated community members came together to form the Triple Divide Watershed Coalition (TDWC) in spring 2011, to utilize the members' strengths, expertise, and combined resources. Colleen Frank, Project Leader for the WREN Grant, Assistant Director of the Potter County Conservation District and coalition member, said of her first meeting: "I really felt everyone had the same goal in mind -- our concern was protecting the water."

The Triple Divide Watershed Coalition name was chosen to not exclude connected water systems outside Potter County. With the help of a WREN Source Water Protection grant, the watershed coalition took form around a broad core of partners. The coalition is comprised of the nine Potter County public water suppliers, the Port Allegany Water Department in neighboring McKean County, and numerous county agencies and organizations working collectively to protect public drinking water resources, improve efficiencies and lower operational costs.

All of the organizations have signed an inter-cooperative agreement. DEP North Central Region's Mark Stephens, P.G. and Penn State Extension's water specialist, Jim Clark, have provided valued guidance and expertise to the group.

The goal of the coalition is to meet the challenge of natural gas development and other sources of pollution through a combination of public education, communication with industry, and/or regulations. County Commissioner Susan Kefover stated: "The strength of experience, resources, and shared information are invaluable to the protection, pro-action, and maintenance of our watersheds in the Potter County region. There is new life stirring among the individual organizations

## Triple Divide Watershed Coalition Members

Austin Borough  
Charles Cole Memorial Hospital  
Coudersport Borough water System  
Galeton Borough Water Authority  
Genesee Township Water Authority  
Northern Tier Children's Home  
Port Allegany Water Department  
Roulette Township Water Authority  
Shinglehouse Borough Water Department  
Ulysses Municipal Authority  
Potter County Commissioners  
Potter County Conservation District  
Potter County Education Council  
Potter County Emergency Management  
Potter County Planning Commission  
PA Department of Environmental Protection – North Central Region Office  
PA Rural Water Association  
Penn State Cooperative Extension

that join this coalition with such an important and broad mandate.”

The group is being hailed as a model in the state. It is unique in that it has the participation of all public water suppliers in the County and one from neighboring McKean County, the Potter County Commissioners, Potter County Planning Commission, Potter County Conservation District, and Penn State Cooperative Extension, working together to utilize the members’ strengths, expertise, and combined resources on a path to ensure that development is done right in vulnerable water supply areas.

The TDWC was recently chosen to receive the prestigious Pennsylvania Governor’s Award for Local Government Excellence in the “Building Community Partnerships” category. Department of Community and Economic Development Secretary C. Alan Walker cited the local organization as a remarkable example of local leaders pulling together for the common good.

Secretary Walker said, “Your communities are fortunate to have dedicated individuals whose commitment helps create better places to live and work.”

### **What is Source Water Protection?**

Source Water Protection is a proactive way to prevent pollution from reaching raw drinking water sources used by the community, including groundwater wells, springs, streams, reservoirs,

river intakes or any combination of water supplies. Voluntary in Pennsylvania, and supported by the Department of Environmental Protection, source water protection offers a methodical approach to plan and implement measures to prevent pollutants from reaching aquifers and surface water sources. It offers a holistic way to operate public water systems more efficiently by beginning with cleaner raw water, offers better protection of public health than relying strictly on treatment, and is less costly than removing pollutants after the fact. A Source Water Protection Plan (SWP) identifies and maps the recharge areas of surface and groundwater sources used by the community, assesses pollution risks, and develops a plan of recommended protection measures.

Having such a plan is vital to protecting community water resources from pollution and accidental spills, and serves as a useful tool for future land development. Each plan is unique, tailored, and mapped to the local protection area -- a real community initiative. The



Photo by Steve Lahr

*Representing Potter County at the Governor’s Award ceremony were, second from left, Jon Huff from Roulette Township, County Planning Director Charlotte Dietrich, Planning Commission Chairman John McLaughlin, Planning Department/Triple Divide Secretary Debbie Ostrum, and Commissioner Paul Heimel. Pictured with the TDWC members are Fred Reddig, Exec. Dir. of the Governor’s Center for Local Government Services, and Secretary C. Alan Walker of the Dept. of Community and Economic Development (third from right).*

Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection provides help at no out-of-pocket cost through its [Source Water Protection Technical Assistance Program](#).

The first step toward protecting those resources for the TDWC was collecting data. Coalition Chairman John McLaughlin (a retired DEP veteran water specialist and a member of the Potter County Planning Commission) supervised the collection of samples from each water supplier. The WREN grant paid for samples to be tested for contaminants associated with natural gas drilling that are outside the normal range of drinking water testing. These valuable tests establish the baseline conditions that will assist in tracking down sources of contamination in the future, whether from natural gas drilling or another pollutant source. These test results, once analyzed, will be made available to the public.

Another important part of the WREN grant is public education. The TDWC is developing a brochure, funded by the WREN grant, to explain to residents where their public water comes from and the areas most in need of protection. In addition, Jim Clark of the Penn State Cooperative Extension, is working with local water suppliers to present a high-school level educational program in each school district. The program uses a chapter of the acclaimed documentary "[Liquid Assets](#)" produced by Penn State Public Broadcasting to explain how water infrastructure works. The DVD brings the subject close to home by detailing the local public water supply through animations, and covers issues of public and private well safety. To date, the program has been presented in the Coudersport Area School District, and to the members of the Potter County Natural Gas Task Force. In both instances, it was well received.

There have already been important advances made in source water protection during the coalition's first year. In addition to completing the baseline water testing, Source Water Protection maps for each water supply are being added to the Potter County Emergency Management Agency's geographic information system (GIS). The goal is to reduce response time to prevent contaminants from reaching a system in case of a hazardous spill from a roadway accident or other catastrophe, and to aid Emergency Management personnel with information about which water suppliers may be affected and how to contact them quickly.

The TDWC has shown the power of cooperation at this early stage. In September of 2011, the PA DEP asked for public comments on the proposal to renew and expand General Permit WMGR064, which would encourage the use of wastewater from the natural gas drilling process as a road de-icer and to control road dust. Members of the coalition were concerned about heavy metals and other contaminants from the brine washing from roadways into surface and groundwater sources. Within 48 hours, the coalition drafted a letter advising against the proposed practice that was approved and signed by all of the coalition members. According to John McLaughlin, this action was "the first great success of the Triple Divide Watershed Coalition."

Members of the TWDC may also soon benefit every day in smaller, simple ways. The coalition is surveying the water testing and treatment chemical supply needs of its

members with an eye toward ordering in bulk and saving money. There is also the possibility of setting up a limited emergency testing facility to be available to member organizations when commercial labs are closed. Finally, the coalition plans to cross-train water treatment staff on the equipment used by the each water supplier. The staff at each rural facility is often small, and an illness or vacation could cause a staffing shortage that a neighboring water supplier could help to alleviate.

Potter County and the TDWC are a positive model for Pennsylvania and the rest of the country on inter-department cooperation among government, utility and public outreach programs. However, a model does not serve much good unless others adopt it. Your community can also take dramatic steps toward protecting your water resources -- and you can help. Make your local government aware of the benefits and resources available for source water protection. Many municipalities have planning commissions or environmental advisory councils that are often short of volunteers. Read the annual Water Quality Report that your public water system is required to send you each year. Determine whether your local water authority has a Source Water Protection Plan; perhaps even attend a few water authority board meetings to discuss the topic. If you are already a member of a local organization interested in source water protection, the DEP's SWPTAP program is available to help assess public water supplies and implement a protection plan. Check with the [Water Resources Education Network \(WREN\)](#), a project of the League of Women Voters for availability of Source Water Protection Education grants, as Potter County did. WREN also offers a wealth of source water protection information, resources, contact information for DEP Regional Source Water Coordinators and links at its [www.sourcewaterpa.org](http://www.sourcewaterpa.org) website.

"The Source Water Protection plan is key," says Jim Clark. His second piece of advice: *Communicate*. "You will need a spearhead, someone trusted, to communicate with all of the groups," he said. For the TDWC, that person is John McLaughlin. Mr. McLaughlin's advice is to know your region's PA DEP Source Water Program Coordinator, and be willing to ask that coordinator or the [Pennsylvania Rural Water Association](#) staff for help. There is help available to help you protect your community's water – just get started!