

Northwest cities praised for environmental work

Saturday, Sep 11, 2004

**By Rob Moritz
Arkansas News Bureau**

LITTLE ROCK - The director of the state Department of Environmental Quality praised five Northwest Arkansas cities on Friday for their work in protecting water quality.

During a state conference on watershed protection, Rogers Mayor Steve Womack also discussed the balance his city has tried to reach between its tremendous growth in recent years and protecting the environment.

"Rogers, Ark., has done some pretty significant things in terms of helping the environment," Womack said.

Friday was the second day of a three-day Arkansas Watershed Advisory Group Conference in Little Rock. The conference, which ends today, includes community leaders, conservation groups and others working to protect water quality in the state.

During a morning meeting, state ADEQ director Marcus Devine said the cities of Rogers, Springdale, Bentonville, Siloam Springs and Rogers have taken proactive steps to reduce the discharge of phosphorous from their municipal sewage plants.

He said the cities have all worked to upgrade their treatment plants and have implemented other environmental protection programs to help the watershed.

After his speech, Devine said the work by those cities was key in enabling Arkansas to reach an agreement with Oklahoma over water quality issues for rivers along their border. The problem was the amount of phosphorous from municipal sewage plants and from chicken litter used as fertilizer in Northwest Arkansas.

In 2002, Oklahoma set limits for phosphorous in six rivers in that state. Four of those rivers, including the Illinois River, flow from Arkansas into Oklahoma.

Despite the ADEQ's argument that Oklahoma's proposed water standards are unachievable under any circumstances, Oklahoma asked the federal Environmental Protection Agency to approve its rules.

Last December, Gov. Mike Huckabee, Devine and other state officials announced an agreement had been reached that would give Arkansas 10 years to implement programs and determine whether it can meet the water standards recommended by Oklahoma for rivers along the border.

The work by the five cities, plus new regulations concerning the use of chicken litter for fertilizer, were key in allowing the agreement to be reached, Devine said.

Rogers voluntarily began reducing the amount of phosphorous nearly 10 years ago and through upgrades to its sewage plant the city now discharges phosphorous at lower levels than is required by state permits, Devine said.

Womack told nearly 100 people that he knew little about environmental issues when he ran for mayor in 1998, and that the environment was not something people discussed with him on the campaign trail.

"At no point did we delve into the subject of water quality or environmental protection," he said, adding that those issues now play a major role in everything from economic development to pot holes.

Womack said Rogers has fully automated its water treatment plant, allowing eight people to do what 24 use to do. Also, the city has worked with industries and residents to improve the disposal of hazardous waste, and a watershed management plan to guide land use has been developed.

Womack also discussed development of the city's plan for a greenway and trail system and the city's efforts to adopt measures to control erosion and improve storm water drainage.

John Czarnecki, a U.S. Geological Survey groundwater specialist, also spoke Friday morning. He said water is being taken from underground aquifers in East and South Arkansas at a rate faster than it can be naturally replenished.

Arkansas is fourth nationally in water use, he said, mostly because of the state's farming industry.

Some projections show that sections of the shallower Alluvial aquifer under much of East Arkansas could begin drying up by 2015.