

Education key to resolving environmental conflicts _ DEQ chief

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BLACKSBURG, Va. -- Better communication and education are key to resolving conflicts over management of Virginia's natural resources, the head of the state agency in charge of environmental quality told a forum Monday at Virginia Tech.

As the state population has increased and become more culturally diverse, more conflicts have arisen over state measures directed at air and water quality and land management, David Paylor, director of the Department of Environmental Quality told university faculty members, students and others representing environmental interests.

Residents become upset over development of land that they don't own, for instance, such as proposals to fill in wetlands or build new power plants.

"We're in the center of the storm," Paylor said of the DEQ. "We have to find solutions that make sense to as many people as they can."

Americans view the government as their protector, Paylor said, noting that he expected that by the end of his talk he would have about 50 new e-mails.

"Time and again we're in a middle of trying to resolve the expectations of the public and the proper economic expectations of those who want to do business in the commonwealth," he said.

Following the severe drought in Virginia in 2002, Paylor said, it took 2½ years for the state to get all parties to agree on a plan to ensure adequate water supplies in the future.

Misperceptions were the problem, he said.

"When the environmental community said 'you're not doing enough conservation,' what the public utilities folks heard was 'you can't build any more reservoirs,' " Paylor said. "When the utility folks said 'we need to meet the needs of our public,' what the environmental community heard was 'you don't give a rip about our fish.'"

Trust had to be built between the groups, he said, and is key to resolving Virginia's water and air

quality issues.

"I'm convinced that the only way we will move forward is with a significant role of partnerships," Paylor said.

Americans must examine their lifestyles and become aware of the impact their decisions are going to have on the planet, he said. Building environmental education into the public school curriculum will help in the future, he said afterward.

State officials recently launched an advertising campaign in the Shenandoah Valley encouraging farmers to step up measures to control runoff.

"We can't just hope to live in concert with the environment any longer because we are a major part of the problem," Paul Gilman, director of the Oak Ridge Center for Advanced Studies, told more than 200 people attending the morning session.

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