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Natural Resources Defense Council Staff Blog

David Beckman's Blog

EPA Steps Up Its Support for Green Infrastructure as Weapon against Polluted Stormwater



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In a few months, the EPA will release new draft rules aimed at reducing stormwater—one of the largest sources of pollution in America's lakes, bays, and beaches. NRDC is pushing hard to have green roofs, pocket parks, rain gardens, and other green infrastructure solutions play a major role in those new national rules, which will update approaches designed more than twenty years ago.

The good news is that the EPA isn't waiting for the new rules to enhance its promotion of green infrastructure solutions.

It has already begun beating the drum—sending a clear signal that green infrastructure is a critical weapon in the fight against polluted water.

Just before Earth Day, EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson gave a [speech](#) in Philadelphia celebrating that city's leadership in embracing green infrastructure solutions.

"The green infrastructure changes you've made since 2006 have saved the city about \$170 million," she said. "We are here today because we want to bring these kinds of benefits to cities and towns across the nation."

A week later, the EPA [launched](#) what is has described as "A Strategic Agenda to Protect Waters and Build More Livable Communities through Green Infrastructure." The plan includes working with 10 cities across the nation adopt some of the same solutions that have helped Philadelphia save money and cut down on pollution. (NRDC is [working](#) with Philadelphia and local partners on that city's green infrastructure plan.)

The agency will advise these cities on how they can use green infrastructure to treat rain where it falls and keep dirty stormwater from entering and overwhelming city sewer systems. The plan also features other components, like clarifying the role of green infrastructure in the regulatory realm; enhancing outreach and access to information on the topic; and financing mechanisms.

These shows of support for green infrastructure will likely influence how states and local governments approach their responsibility to clean up water pollution.

The EPA's most significant voice is its regulatory voice. It is the principle interpreter of the Clean Water Act, and it has the authority to review and reject permits. I certainly hope the agency will use all the levers of its administrative role—like the forthcoming rule making on stormwater—to advance green infrastructure.

But I am also glad to see it use additional ways of communicating support. Administrator Jackson's comments and the new plan may not be binding, but local governments will take note. When that federal agency in charge of approving permits and grants to local communities is focused on green infrastructure, it focuses the attention of local governments as well.

It's like when Wal-Mart announces that it would like its suppliers to put certain sustainability practices in place. Even if these practices aren't required by a contract at first, the fact that the biggest retailer in the United States cares about sustainability means suppliers will respond.

I hope we see a similar dynamic unfold with clean water solutions. Many local governments, like Philadelphia and Los Angeles, are already adopting green infrastructure programs. But there is no doubt that getting the unambiguous backing of the most influential federal clean water agency will help bring green infrastructure to more states and more communities.