Joint Statement on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and Freshwater Ecosystem Conservation

by organizations dedicated to sustainable development and the conservation of freshwater resources

Statement summary:

Development and conservation organizations have a vested interest in promoting policies, plans and projects that integrate access to water supply and sanitation with the conservation and sustainable management of freshwater resources. Healthy freshwater ecosystems provide the basis for water supply, flood control, food and numerous other services on which millions depend for human health and well-being. Promoting integrated approaches to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and freshwater conservation is a critical need and is essential to meeting both human and ecosystem protection goals.

Photo by David Snyder for CRS.

Our organizations support the theory of change that not only do freshwater conservation and WASH development efforts reinforce each other, but they are mutually dependent upon each other in order to succeed.

We recognize that:

- For conservation efforts to be sustainable, poverty must be reduced. The resources on which people depend, particularly the marginalized, need to be managed in a sustainable manner in order for poverty to be reduced in the longer term. This is particularly the case where people depend on local water sources, such as wetlands, for water, food and biodiversity benefits, where the balance of nature and livelihoods are closely intertwined.
- Freshwater ecosystems provide the underpinning for water supply, sanitation and hygiene programs. Ground water and surface water in rivers, lakes and wetlands are the largest sources of available water for drinking, washing and cooking.
- Both water supply and sanitation projects can either degrade or help protect freshwater ecosystem health depending on how they are designed and implemented. Sustainable WASH projects play a great role in both improving the lives of people and in supporting the conservation of freshwater-dependent species.
- Already water-related climate change impacts are being experienced in the form of more severe and more frequent droughts and floods. The poor, who are the most vulnerable, are also likely to be affected the most. Protecting natural systems is one of the critical ways to make sure they can continue to receive water in times of change.

We can address these challenges together:

The long-term sustainability of WASH services depends on the conservation and protection of the broader watershed and the wise management of built infrastructure. It also requires that such infrastructure is resilient to future changes in water use and climate patterns. Integrating efforts of the environmental and WASH communities can be explored in four main areas:

1. Technical: programs to protect natural systems can improve the predictability and sustainability of adequate quantities and quality of water for drinking, cooking, irrigation and other uses. At the same time, well-planned sanitation programs can protect freshwater and coastal ecosystems.

2. Maximizing investment: collaborative efforts to protect watersheds and implement WASH programs can maximize community participation, save critical funds, and allow for synergies between WASH and environmental objectives.

3. Advocacy: efforts on Capitol Hill to protect funding to improve the implementation of water conservation and WASH projects will be strengthened from an even broader coalition of allies. Collaboration between the two sectors will open new doors on the Hill and allow a stronger, collective voice to protect foreign assistance for integrated water conservation and WASH programming.

4. Awareness-raising: It is necessary to raise the understanding of the importance of integration of WASH and freshwater conservation among key stakeholders.

This statement represents our commitment to integrating the improvement of access to water and sanitation services with the conservation and sustainable management of freshwater resources for the benefit of humans, species and ecosystems.