



The Only “BMP” That Really Works

Better and More Planning

Warning!

This is a diatribe aimed at best management practices, or “BMPs,” the most ubiquitous acronym of the new era of water resources protection. BMPs can be roughly defined as a wide range of structures, policies and procedures that are designed to reduce nonpoint source pollution, or polluted runoff.

BMPs don’t work. That’s not to say that many are not effective at reducing or removing pollutants, because they are. Rather, it’s to say that the job description of BMPs—removing pollutants at a given site—is not equal to the greater task of addressing the underlying root of the problem, poor land use planning.

Treating individual symptoms does not cure a disease. BMPs remove sediment, metals and nutrients; sometimes, they actually prevent the generation of these pollutants. But BMPs do not guide land use to appropriate areas, combat creeping suburban sprawl or inventory and prioritize natural resources for protection. Only sound natural resource-based land use planning can do these things.

The problem is not with BMPS themselves, but with the fact that by elevating technological fixes to the status of solutions, the focus of the water resources protection community has been diverted from the much more critical need to assist local governments do a better job of planning to protect their natural resources. The only way of meeting this need is through education, but even education can be subverted by the siren song of the BMP.

Take planning and zoning commission “A.” They have recently undergone a series of workshops on storm water management, focusing on—what else?—BMPs. They know a detention from a retention pond, and can debate removal efficiencies of grassy swales ‘til the cows come home. They even have a new zoning regulation mandating that pre- and post-development runoff be the same. Thus, when a developer comes in with an application for a 330 unit residential subdivision along a local trout stream, they’re all set—but for what? They’re all set for a technical discussion on the *specifics of pollution mitigation for that property*.

The problems with this scene are: (a) the proposal is looked at in isolation, apart from its role in the greater landscape of the town, watershed, or region; (b) the commission, no matter how good their training, is not likely to emerge victorious in any debate on BMPs when up against the developer’s engineers; and (c) without any language in their plans and regulations to back them up, the commission has little power to influence the

environmental impacts of the development, beyond the technical debates on runoff volume.

In the neighboring town, commission “B” has been educated to use land use planning to direct the future growth of their town in ways that protect natural resources. They have language in both their Master Plan and their land use regulations that clearly states their goal of protecting their town’s natural resources. They have a prioritized natural resource inventory and an open space plan backing up that goal. With applicants in this town, the discussion goes much differently. It’s about general impacts and goals, and puts the ball firmly in the court of the developer: Which watershed is the property in? Which subbasin? Which way does the natural drainage flow? Does it drain to a priority resource? How does the proposed development fit in with the town’s goals for the watershed and for the town?

Unlike scenario A, this commission: (a) can consider the proposal within a larger context; (b) puts the burden of proving environmentally sound development on the developer; and (c) is backed up by official town policies that empower the commission to explore a much wider range of considerations and options, but do not confine the discussion to technical debates on engineering details.

As the literature on BMPs expands, and as BMPs are equated with water resource protection, local land use officials become more confused. Confusion leads to boredom at best, and inactivity at worst.

To really protect their town’s natural resources, they need to be spending time on things like soils-based zoning, cluster housing, open space protection and natural resource inventories. If these things are in place, commissioners can concern themselves with the overall picture, and the complexities of stormwater management practices can be left up to professionals qualified to debate the fine points.

BMPs are a needed, useful, and important part of the nonpoint source pollution/watershed management scene. But the first wave of federal and state programs in these areas is still suffering from the regulatory, technology-driven heritage of the point source era. As we move together from point to nonpoint, from deforestation to incremental forest fragmentation, from “problem-based” to community-based environmental protection, it’s essential that we lift our gaze from the fascination of shiny technology, and fix it firmly on the gritty and difficult issue of local planning.

It’s land use, stupid! And without good planning, it’s a losing game, every time.

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Contact:

University of Connecticut, CES
1066 Saybrook Road
Box 70
Haddam, CT 06438

Phone:

(860) 345-4511

Email:

nemo@uconn.edu

Web Address:

nemo.uconn.edu

Written by:

Chester L. Arnold

Chester L. Arnold is a Water Quality Educator for the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System. He is a principal of the Nonpoint Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO) Program, which educates local land use officials about the links between land use planning and natural resource protection. This is the first in a series of NEMO “Soapbox” editorials. April 1997.

