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Groups Say Stronger Clean Water Act and Funding Needed For Safety of Tennessee Families and Environment

Press Conferences Announce Time to Keep the Promise of Clean Water

October 18 - On the 29th anniversary of the Clean Water Act, Tennessee citizens challenged the state of Tennessee and Congress to make good on the promise of clean water made by the Clean Water Act in 1972. Today marks the beginning of the "Year of Clean Water" leading up to October 18, 2002, the 30th anniversary of the Clean Water Act, one of the most significant environmental laws of the last century and for the future.

"Our health and protection from unsafe and polluted waters should remain one of the highest priorities of the state," said Danielle Droitsch, Executive Director of the Tennessee Clean Water Network (TCWN). There will be **four press conferences** [information below] across the state celebrating the kick-off leading up to October 18, 2002, the 30th anniversary of the Clean Water Act.

The Clean Water Act of 1972 was passed when many of our nation's major rivers were virtual sewers and we were losing wetlands at an unprecedented rate. The Cuyahoga River was so polluted that it burst into flames and the Potomac River was considered "a severe threat to anyone who comes in contact with it." Thanks to the Clean Water Act, things are better today.

"This nation set a goal of eliminating all discharges to navigable waters by 1985. Obviously have not reached that goal," said Will Callaway, Executive Director of Tennessee Environmental Council (TEC). "We want to encourage people across the state to take responsibility for cleaning up their own streams and to insist that pollution discharges become a thing of the past."

Today, nearly 30 years after the passage of this important law, the Clean Water Act's promise of clean water for everyone has yet to be kept. While many of the country's most obvious pollution problems have been addressed, the Clean Water Act has yet to be fully implemented and enforced.

"When the Clean Water Act was passed, it was as if we'd promised each other to stop poisoning our own water supplies, destroying our natural streams and wetlands, and exterminating aquatic species faster than we could identify them," said David Sligh, Southeast Director of American Rivers, "We've taken some important steps to try to live up to our promises but we have far to go. I hope the next year brings a new commitment to truly protect and restore our waters for all uses, even when the solutions aren't the fastest or cheapest we can find."

In their last state water quality report, Tennessee reported that 31 percent (7540 miles) of monitored rivers do not meet water quality standards. In addition, 22 percent of Tennessee's monitored lakes (118,081 acres) do not meet water quality standards. According to the state, a staggering 59 percent of Tennessee's rivers are not monitored for water quality standards. As a result, the public cannot be informed as to the safety of these waters. On a more positive note, most of Tennessee lakes are monitored.

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In addition, a recent report found that 53 percent of Tennessee's major sewage treatment and industrial plants violated the law during the 15-month study period. Other studies show that water polluters are rarely fined for their violations. When polluters are fined, penalties are often too low to discourage future pollution. "As a former employee of TDEC, I know there is a lot more that can be done to protect our waters, involve interested citizens, and fine polluters enough to help fund the programs without an income tax and keep our parks open and free," said Barry Sulkin, Director, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility in Tennessee and former Chief of Enforcement for TN Water Pollution Control.

The groups challenged Congress and the Bush Administration to make good on the promise of clean water by taking the following steps before the 30th anniversary of the Clean Water Act on October 18, 2002. Specifically they requested that Congress and the Bush administration to:

- ?? Protect our children and our neighborhoods from raw sewage discharges that all too frequently flow into our streets, neighborhoods, and playgrounds.
- ?? Implement, not weaken, our national watershed cleanup program for our most polluted waters.
- ?? Provide greater protection for our nation's wetlands by amending the Clean Water Act to include protection for isolated waters, and by passing legislation to close the so-called "Tulloch" loophole that allows pollution to destroy wetlands and degrade streams without permits or controls.
- ?? Pass enforcement legislation that ensures polluters are held accountable for violating the law.

The groups also called on the Tennessee legislature to ensure that there is adequate funding of those programs responsible for the protection of our state waters and enforcement of Clean Water Act. According to the Tennessee Clean Water Network, increased funding is needed not only for programs but also for employee salaries that are significantly lower as compared with other southern states. "If we expect safe waters, then we need to ensure our state programs are adequately staffed and funded. Right now, we have too many underpaid, overworked, and demoralized personnel who are not even provided with sufficient resources to implement basic watershed protection activities," said Droitsch.

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