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First State's future depends on healthy water

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From the north, the Brandywine-Christina Basin supplies 60 percent of our drinking water; to the south, the shimmering Inland Bays provide recreational opportunities and the potential for a burgeoning aquaculture industry. Because of its fortuitous geography and hydrology, Delaware's economic future is inextricably linked to the maintenance of clean and plentiful waters.

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Delaware is a water state. One of just three states on a peninsula, the First State is nestled between two of the most valuable estuaries in the country - the Delaware and the Chesapeake. It is the lowest-lying state in the Union. One-third of its landmass is covered by wetlands; 20 percent lies within the 500-year floodplain. From the north, the Brandywine-Christina Basin supplies 60 percent of our drinking water; to the south, the shimmering Inland Bays provide recreational opportunities and the potential for a burgeoning aquaculture industry.

Because of its fortuitous geography and hydrology, Delaware's economic future is inextricably linked to the maintenance of clean and plentiful waters. That is why we support Gov. Markell's Clean Waters for Delaware's Future initiative, which proposes to invest approximately \$30 million annually to restore Delaware's waters within a generation. The initiative would require the average Delawarean to put aside about \$1 per week - the approximate cost of a bottle of water. Not only is this a wise economic investment, it is the right thing to do for future generations.

Delaware's waters need our help. Legacy pollutants, nutrient overloads, failing septic systems and urban runoff have rendered the great majority of our streams, rivers and lakes unsafe for swimming and fishing, let alone drinking. As Gov. Markell reflected in his State of the State address, this is not only unacceptable, it is embarrassing. We can and should do something about this problem.

We have a financial stake in healthy waters. Delaware enjoys the highest per capita GDP in the country, a prosperity that flows (at least in part) from our water resources. Indeed, studies have shown a 94 percent correlation between a state's clean water supply and its GDP growth. Similarly, studies by the University of Delaware have found that the First State's watersheds contribute up to \$7 billion annually to the state's economy. Our waterways support more than \$6 billion in annual economic activity from ports/navigation (\$3.3 billion), recreation (\$2.4 billion), forest/agriculture (\$1.1 billion), fish/wildlife, public parks, water quality and water supply (\$344 million-\$591 million), and stormwater/flood control (\$73 million). Ecosystem goods and services, such as the water filtration value of habitat, are worth \$6.7 billion per year from freshwater wetlands (\$2.4 billion), marine waters (\$1.2 billion) and farmland (\$1.7 billion). Our watersheds support more than 70,000 direct/indirect jobs and \$2 billion in wages from water/wastewater construction and operation, tourism, agriculture and coastal jobs.

Our waters represent such a robust economic engine, investment in their maintenance would seem a no-brainer. Many other states and municipalities have reached this conclusion and made smart investments in their water infrastructure. For example, New York City realized it was six times less expensive to reforest the Catskills than to pay for a \$10 billion wastewater filtration plant. North Carolina - which established a Clean Water Management Trust Fund - is another shining example of smart investment in water resources.

Simply put, the governor's statewide goal of restoring Delaware's streams within a generation is a great idea for both the short and long-term well-being of our state. In the short term, investing in clean water will put money back into the economy, bolster our GDP and spawn jobs for contractors, hotels and sporting goods stores. Over the long haul, investing in the maintenance of this vital resource will help ensure that future generations enjoy the same economic prosperity (and natural benefits) that we have.

Conservation of our natural resources is a long-held American ideal that honors the inextricable link between the protection of our environment and sustenance of our economy. Theodore Roosevelt understood this a century ago when, with the stroke of a pen, he protected millions of acres of our greatest national parks and forests for their environmental and economic value, recognizing it would provide "the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time." The governor's ambitious goal of restoring our state's watersheds within a generation will provide the greatest good to the greatest number of Delawareans for the longest time. As responsible citizens of this great state, we owe it to future generations to support this goal.

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