American Sustainable Business Council

Water Runoff Pollution Threatens Kentucky Economy

Clean Water is Good for Business

Runoff polution damages Kentucky industries, including agriculture and bourbon distilling. Handled poorly, runoff pollution costs businesses and other taxpayers billions of dollars every year.

What is Runoff Pollution?

Runoff water is rain not immediately absorbed and filtered by the ground that instead runs off the surface, seeping into streams, ponds, rivers, lakes, and oceans. Byproducts of modern agriculture, urbanization and industry all contaminate runoff water.

Agricultural runoff comes from livestock waste and chemical products such as fertilizers and synthetic pesticides. All contain high levels of nitrogen, phosphorous, and other compounds that rain sluices into bodies of water, where they cause pollution and fertilize algae blooms that kill fish.

Urban runoff results from oil, grease, antifreeze, brake fluid and other polluting products deposited by motor vehicles on roads, in parking lots and other impervious paved surfaces, and from improper disposal of products such as paint and lawn care chemicals. All mix with rainwater that carries them directly into bodies of water before topsoil can absorb them.

Industrial runoff is caused by inadequate disposal of industrial waste. Every year, coal-burning power plants emit millions of tons of coal ash; fine particles infused with toxins like sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide.

IN A SNAPSHOT

- In 2012, the EPA found over 7,000 miles of rivers and streams and over 90,000 acres of lakes, reservoirs, and ponds in Kentucky were designated "impaired" — too polluted for human use.
- Kentucky has over 77,000 farms generating over $5 billion dollars every year. Runoff pollution from fertilizers and pesticides used in farming cause erosion and soil degradation that make land unfit for growing crops.
- Runoff pollution hurts tourism and recreation business by damaging lakes and streams in state parks and other outdoor areas.

These fall on waterways and on the ground, to mix with rainwater as runoff pollution.

Runoff Pollution Costs Kentucky Businesses

Runoff pollution from fertilizers and pesticides used in farming contaminate water sources and cause erosion and soil degradation that make land unfit for growing crops. Runoff pollution also hurts tourism and recreation business by damaging lakes and streams in state parks and other outdoor areas. It also kills local fisheries by fueling algae blooms. All other businesses are also vulnerable to water pollution: All need a healthy workforce, healthy customers and an uncontaminated supply chain to survive.

Water Pollution, Especially from Agriculture, Endangers Kentucky's Economic Potential

Runoff pollution endangers thousands of Kentucky businesses and the livelihoods of our people. Agriculture is one of the biggest sources of runoff pollution but is also one of the industries that will lose the most if runoff pollution is not controlled.

Non-point runoff pollution (from a combination of agricultural, industrial, and urban sources) is the biggest source of water pollution in Kentucky, with agricultural runoff the primary cause. When a body of water is too polluted for human use, it is rated "impaired." In 2012, the EPA found over 7,000 miles of rivers and streams and over 90,000 acres of lakes, reservoirs, and ponds in Kentucky were impaired.

This level of runoff pollution imperils our economy. Kentucky has over 77,000 farms generating over $5 billion dollars every year. All of these farms rely on Kentucky's rivers and lakes for their water. Runoff pollution puts Kentucky's tourism and fishing industries on the line too. It can make Kentucky's waterways unfit for recreation, including those in popular attractions such as the Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area.

Runoff pollution must be reduced quickly to avoid severe damage to Kentucky's farming, fishing, tourism, and other businesses around the state.

To safeguard our economy and overall wellbeing, Kentucky should:

- **Increase funding for research** to update Kentucky's Agriculture Water Quality Act. The Kentucky Agriculture Water Quality Act of 1994 regulates water quality in Kentucky. The Act requires the owner of an agricultural or forestry operation larger than 10 acres to develop and implement a water quality plan that includes best management practices (BMPs). Additional funding is needed to research how agricultural practices using fertilizers and pesticides should be regulated to protect our waters.
- **Encourage Kentucky's Agriculture Water Quality Act** to be made a national statute. Kentucky's Agriculture Water Quality Act and its attendant Agriculture Water Quality Authority are excellent templates of effective systems that enforce BMPs (Best Management Practices) to combat runoff pollution. While varying biomes and climate zones exist within the U.S., a national version of Kentucky's law can be adapted — and should be vigorously applied — on a national level.
- **Develop Kentucky's own criteria** to quantify nitrogen and phosphorous pollution levels. Agriculture is essential to the state, but agriculture also plays a major role in contaminating water quality throughout the Mississippi River Basin. Farming itself is also endangered by runoff pollution that erodes and contaminates soil. In advance of eventual regulation and potential selectivity in federal grant awards, Kentucky should develop numeric criteria for nitrogen and phosphorous levels as part of a demonstrable control program.
- **Prevent new sources of pollution**, especially in problem areas. Where water quality is already impaired, control of non-point source pollution must be utilized to prevent new sources of pollution in those areas. (Anti-degredation policy makes an exception only for significant social or economic development in those areas). The EPA would need to define what counts as "existing nonpoint source control compliance issues." ★

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The American Sustainable Business Council is a growing coalition of business organizations and companies committed to advancing market solutions and policies to support a sustainable economy. ASBC and its organizational members represent more than 250,000 businesses and more than 325,000 business leaders across the U.S.

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