

# Farmers' water rights in jeopardy

By DIETER KRIEG

LANCASTER — If Pennsylvania farmers don't make their water requirements known soon to the Department of Environmental Resources, they could be left out of the state's water resource plans, says Agriculture Secretary Kent Shelhamer.

The Susquehanna River Basin Commission is currently drawing up plans for water use in Pennsylvania in order to assure that future water requirements can be met. Crediting the Commission with having good intentions, Shelhamer nonetheless exclaimed that they are good men with well-meaning plans who don't know what they're doing. The agriculture chief's primary concern is that the farmer not be ignored or mistreated in the water resource plans.



John McSparran

As far as Shelhamer is concerned, the farmer's rights stand in jeopardy if something isn't done soon. To illustrate his concern, he noted that the Commission will limit consumptive water use on any size farm to 20,000 gallons per day during drought periods. Shelhamer

leaves no doubt that he isn't satisfied, saying that it's during drought periods that extra water is needed to irrigate crops. His Department is looking into the matter, but he's also urging farmers to become involved in a letter writing campaign.

The meeting Shelhamer and about 60 others attended last Wednesday specifically concerned irrigation water needs in the Susquehanna watershed. Other areas of water use on the farm were also brought to light, however. The 20,000 gallon per farm limit, includes water for such uses as livestock watering. Shelhamer isn't convinced that such uses are being treated fairly by the SRBC, which is an arm of the Department of Environmental Resources.

John McSparran, who heads the water resource



Kent Shelhamer

planning for DER, isn't as concerned about the issue as is Shelhamer. Taking the podium after Shelhamer had left, McSparran assured the group that DER and SRBC were interested in keeping the farmers' water needs in mind. To back up his claim, he encouraged every farmer

to send a statement to the SRBC explaining their water needs.

Technically, DER already has a regulation in the books which could enforce the 20,000 gallon per farm limit during a dry spell. A farmer who would need more water than that per day is required to have a permit, said McSparran, a former Lancaster Countian. Presently, not a single Lancaster County farmer has a permit.

McSparran pointed out that the water limitation doesn't go into effect unless water flow in the Susquehanna and its tributaries reaches 10-year low levels. This point is what has Shelhamer most concerned. He notes that it is during such times that crops are in most need of irrigation. If they can't be irrigated during such stress

periods, then the entire crop could be lost.

McSparran and Shelhamer both agree that water usage will rise significantly in years to come. Both also agree that some sort of regulations must be established in order to assure that all segments of society can be supplied with adequate water.

"We cannot survive in agriculture without adequate water," Shelhamer exclaimed. The Susquehanna River Basin Commission's regulations could have a very harmful effect on Pennsylvania agriculture," he emphasized.

The agriculture secretary noted that in an earlier case involving farmers, DER set up erosion and sedimentation regulations without

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