

West Harlem Environmental Action
New York League of Conservation Voters
Natural Resources Defense Council

Congressman Charles B. Rangel
House of Representatives
2354 Rayburn Office Building
Washington, D.C., 20515-3215

October 2, 2007

Honorable Congressman Rangel:

We are writing to you on behalf of our members, your constituents and the nine million New Yorkers who are consumers of New York City's public water supply.

Specifically, we urge you to support passage of H.R. 1576 – legislation that, among other things, would provide federal tax incentives to encourage donations of land that would protect surface drinking water supply lands in New York and around the nation – and to use your leadership to move this bill through the Ways and Means Committee to a favorable vote on the House floor. The bill, sponsored by Representative Mike Thompson and many of your House colleagues, amends the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to make permanent the federal tax incentives on lands donated for conservation or preservation purposes.

As you know, 90 percent of New York's downstate water supply comes from the City's Catskill and Delaware watersheds, located as far as 125 miles to the north. The water has historically been of such high quality that your constituents (along with half the state's population) have access to some of the cleanest tap water in the world.

But encroaching development and certain farming activities in the rural watershed region are threatening the long-term ability of New York's upstate watershed system to supply clean and inexpensive water to city residents. And if New York City is required to filter its Catskill and Delaware water supplies, the capital costs alone would likely exceed 8 billion dollars. The result would be a dramatic increase in water rates for all New Yorkers. Thus, providing an economic incentive to safeguard the city's public water supply lands now and staving off the need for drinking water filtration in New York makes economic as well as environmental sense.

To avoid an 8 billion dollar filtration order, the EPA has directed the city to undertake a major watershed land protection program and to work with land trusts and other non-governmental organizations to acquire easements that will keep these lands as protected, working landscapes. Such a program is essential to help prevent ill-advised

sprawl development that would turn these forests, farms and meadows into roadways, rooftops and parking lots – all of which would send stormwater runoff racing into the streams that feed our city’s priceless upstate reservoirs.

H.R. 1576, and its companion bill, S. 469, is critical to the success of this filtration avoidance and drinking water protection program. The proposed legislation would help with the acquisition of easements by land trusts and by the city – giving modest-income farmers a real tax benefit from donating easements. In short, this legislation could help make New York City’s 2007- 2017 watershed land acquisition program successful. Most important, it would protect the health of city residents by safeguarding lands from pollution that might otherwise flow into our unfiltered drinking water reservoirs.

Unless we want New York City’s water supply to jump dramatically in cost, or we don’t mind asking all New Yorkers to regularly purchase bottled water (an expensive and currently unnecessary alternative), Congress needs to act. With your leadership, we are convinced that H.R. 1576 could pass the House and, along with S. 469, reach the President’s desk.

Please feel free to have your staff contact us if you require additional information. We thank you in advance for your cooperation in protecting the quality and cost of the city’s irreplaceable water supply.

Signed:

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