

James Van Blarcom Testimony

I'm James Van Blarcom, a dairy farmer in Bradford County for 47 years. My entire life has been spent living and working near the many streams and waterways throughout the county as we farm over 2000 acres. I have had many years serving in leadership with the Bradford County Farm Bureau and Bradford County Conservation District.

Early in my farming career, farmers, townships and landowners were able to maintain waterways as needed. We could clean out down trees or gravel beds when they were too high for water to pass over them. About 30 years ago, DEP decided we could not clean out the streams without their approval. Senator Roger Madigan at the time, listened to our concerns and held hearings similar to this one, to no avail. For 30 years, I have listened to farmers and landowners complain about the lack of stream maintenance. I have seen first-hand, homes, buildings and crop lands damaged and destroyed due to flooding.

Our local conservation districts have tried to work with DEP for workable solutions without success. DEP does not understand our glaciated soils in Northeast PA. They seem to apply the same rules across the whole state, regardless of the different soil types, land structure and terrain. Our local conservation districts have found some ways to limit gravel movement but it is costly and we are years and millions of dollars away from reaching stabilization of our waterways. The governments job is to protect our citizens, not to take away the ability for citizens to protect themselves.

In the short term, we need an open permit to remove gravel and debris from our waterways in a timely manner. When we have expected inches of rainfall, we need to be able to act during and after flooding to prevent worse situations. Take away DEP control and give it to local municipalities. PennDOT is even hampered by DEPs slow and costly permitting system. This last July, the flooding on our farm also took out a home on the end of Sopertown Road. In the clean-up process, the 12 person PennDOT crew stood on the job for an entire working day waiting on a DEP permit to give them to clear out 50 ft of wood debris that clogged the bridge.

Your policy committee needs to take a drive up RT 15 to Addison NY, out through the towns of Addison, Woodhull and Jasper, NY. They were also devastated by flooding this past August. Since then, NY and the counties north of us have cleaned out those waterways. They acted quickly and widened those streams by almost tripling the original size of the stream. Now those waterways can carry a very high volume of water. Not here in PA, we have had flooding and little to nothing has been done to maintain our streams. On our farm alone, we saw flooding in 2018, 6 inches of rain fell in the course of an hour after a record waterfall that summer. And again, just this summer, we flooded again with 5 inches in 20 minutes. It is not about money, it is about DEP policy, which makes it difficult and impossible for anyone to maintain our waterways. It's time to take away DEP control of our stream beds.