Editorial from The Baltimore Sun

**Water rationing**
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The anticipated arrival of perhaps tens of thousands of workers in Maryland as part of the U.S. military's base realignment and closure plan may severely test the state's commitment to protect increasingly scarce water supplies.

At issue, particularly in Harford and Cecil counties, where much of the growth is expected, are the availability of drinking water and the capacity for treating wastewater and sewage while meeting strict new pollution limits intended to reverse the degradation of the Chesapeake Bay.

What's required to meet this challenge is a highly coordinated, cooperative campaign involving state, county and municipal governments to plan, share resources, protect rural areas and produce innovative tactics for conservation and water reuse.

Failure to mount such an effort would simply send new development out to what remains of Maryland's farms and forests, where permits for wells and septic tanks are easy to get but add mightily to the danger of drought and further bay pollution.

A recent review of water resources by the state Planning Department found Cecil and Harford counties limited in their ability to manage tight supplies because there is little cooperation between them and the municipalities within their borders, which own most of the water and sewer facilities. A far better approach would be the creation of a regional authority - similar to what has long been used in the Washington metropolitan area to develop and share water supplies and manage sewage treatment.

An existing arrangement among Baltimore, Baltimore County and parts of Anne Arundel, Howard and Carroll counties might be expanded. Or perhaps Maryland's northeast counties could partner with neighbors in Delaware and Pennsylvania.

Such a cooperative venture would be particularly helpful to Cecil County, which is close to reaching its nitrogen pollution limits on the North East sewage treatment plan that serves the county's preferred development corridor along Interstate 95. Through a regional framework, Cecil might be able to acquire pollution credits from a neighbor and stop development from spilling into farmland.
Beyond that, the state and the counties must start imposing much tougher restrictions on well and septic tank permits to further protect those rural areas and the waterways that flow through and beneath them.

New water sources are very difficult to develop. Reservoirs pose environmental concerns; desalination of bay water - contemplated by the city of Aberdeen - is expensive. Further draws on the Susquehanna and Potomac rivers aren't guaranteed.

The era of cheap, clean, plentiful water, long taken for granted in Maryland, appears to be over. But quick, thoughtful action can prevent safe, drinkable and swimmable water from becoming a luxury beyond reach.

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