

# Water quality linked to land use

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To better serve county officials' technical assistance needs in the areas of water quality protection and land use planning and management, NACo conducted an informal survey of members of the Environment, Energy and Land Use Steering Committee, the National Association of County Planners, past Five Star Grant recipients and others. Even though the survey results are not statistically significant, the information does provide a snapshot of perspectives on the issues.

Out of 245 surveys e-mailed, 44 people responded, for a rate of 18 percent. Nearly all respondents were elected or appointed officials with about the same number of county elected officials (16) and county planners (14). Slightly more than half of all of the respondents were from counties with populations under 150,000 that are growing at a rate of one percent to five percent per year. Of the 31 respondents who identified their counties, the most were from the West (13) and the fewest were from the Southwest (2) with close to equal representation from the Midwest, Southeast and East coast regions.

Most of the respondents (84 percent) stated that land use decisions are linked to water resources protection, and 70 percent use geographic information system (GIS) tools and models to understand how different land use decisions may maintain, improve or negatively impact water quality.

Eighty-six percent of the respondents have county land-use plans in place. Floodplain management and septic system management were the primary water resource issues addressed in land use plans, followed by wetlands protection, watershed management and stormwater management. State regulations were cited as the primary reason water resources were addressed in land use plans.

Federal regulations, citizen concern and flooding issues were also reasons that ranked high. More than half of the respondents said their counties used zoning to address water

## County Input Needed!

Please share your county's experiences, needs, success stories and lessons learned on tools and techniques, (such as GIS) to link land use and water resources issues. Contact Abigail Friedman at 202/942-4225 or [afriedma@naco.org](mailto:afriedma@naco.org).

resources issues, and floodplain and subdivision codes and ordinances were used by more than 75 percent.

There were a wide range of reasons why respondents said it was difficult to address water resource issues in their land use plan, and those reasons listed below were cited more than once:

- The municipalities within the county control land use.
- Citizens do not want any regulations.

• Issues covered by state and federal laws and regulations or natural resource districts cover all of the issues.

• Water quantity is more of an issue than water quality.

• Water quality is not an issue; and

• The comprehensive plan is out of date.

These responses reflect the diversity of county authorities, state laws and geography across the country.

Meanwhile, concerns about unplanned or unmanaged growth were raised by just over half of the respondents, who said both elected county officials and citizens were very concerned. Similarly, both elected county officials (48 per-

cent) and citizens (44 percent) perceived the term "smart growth" somewhat positively in terms of land use.

When asked "How often do you use the term 'smart growth' when discussing land use issues?" the highest ranked response was "rarely" at 34 percent followed closely by "at least once a week," with 30 percent, and "once or twice a month," with 23 percent. The lowest ranked response was a tie between "every day" and "never," at 7 percent.

For more information about the survey results, please contact Abigail Friedman at 202/942-4225 or [afriedma@naco.org](mailto:afriedma@naco.org). To learn about NACo's water resources and land use programs, visit [www.naco.org/techassistance](http://www.naco.org/techassistance).

*(Erik Johnston, community services assistant, compiled the survey data cited in this article.)*

