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Water Quality: Federal Role in Addressing - and Contributing to - Nonpoint Source Pollution: Report to the Chairman, SubCommittee on Water Resources and Environment

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GOVERNMENT REPORT

WATER QUALITY: FEDERAL ROLE IN ADDRESSING—AND CONTRIBUTING TO—NONPOINT SOURCE POLLUTION: REPORT TO THE CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives, (GAO/RCED-99-45, February 1999) 109pp; \$2.00; paperback.

This report by the General Accounting Office (“GAO”) provides background information and funding levels for existing federal programs that address nonpoint source pollution. It also examines the way the Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”) assesses the overall potential costs of reducing nonpoint source pollution nationwide, alternative methods for doing so, and describes nonpoint source pollution from federal facilities, lands, and activities that federal agencies manage or authorize, or for which they issue permits or licenses.

Chapter One briefly reviews the EPA and the states’ roles in addressing point sources of water pollution. Point sources are generally municipal and industrial facilities’ discharges of pollutants directly into water via a point, such as a pipe or other conveyance. Conversely, nonpoint (or diffused) sources include the runoff from a variety of land based activities such as timber harvesting, grazing, agriculture, and development which is eventually deposited into rivers, lakes, and coastal waters, or introduced into groundwater. The EPA identifies these nonpoint sources of water pollution as a primary reason for continued problems in improving the nation’s waters.

Chapter Two identifies a number of programs implemented by the EPA to deal with nonpoint source pollution. Over thirty-five federal agencies deal directly with the problem or focus on other objectives that indirectly address nonpoint source problems. The GAO report identifies the more significant of these programs, describes their roles, and identifies the amount annually that the agency devotes to water quality activities.

The third chapter of the report discusses the EPA’s methodology for estimating nonpoint source pollution control costs. The EPA relies heavily on states to document capital needs. However, the EPA determined that its methodology is limited. It considers only pollution from sources such as agriculture, silviculture, and animal feeding operations, and fails to address “other potentially significant nonpoint sources” such as abandoned mines, atmospheric deposition, hydromodification, marinas, and urban areas. As a result, not all costs

associated with controlling nonpoint source pollution are included in the estimate. Also, the methodology employed by the EPA fails to include the costs of operation and maintenance incurred by implementing “best management practices” to control pollution. Thus, the GAO found it difficult to effectively evaluate the EPA’s cost control estimates.

In the fourth and final chapter, the GAO identifies the federal activities that significantly contribute to nonpoint source pollution. According to federal and state officials interviewed by the GAO, there are federal activities that have the potential to contribute significantly to nonpoint source pollution: silviculture (timber harvesting and associated roads), grazing, drainage from abandoned mines, recreation, and hydromodification (operation of dams). The GAO describes the types of impact that each of these governmental activities has on nonpoint source pollution. The report noted that the federal government owns about twenty percent of the total land surface area in the lower 48 states. Most of this land comprises the eleven Western states—Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Thus, the activities of the federal government significantly impact watersheds in those areas.

The report closes with comments from several regulatory agencies on the GAO’s findings. This report is an informative discussion of the continuing problem of nonpoint source water pollution. The GAO represents fairly the federal government’s role in contributing to this problem, and addresses valid concerns with the administration of the programs designed to deal with the problem on a national level.

Kimberley Crawford