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'No-brainer': Harvesting story prompts rain to Kaine

by [Dave McNair](#)

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Hydraulic Wash's struggle to install a rainwater collection system has made its way to Gov. Tim Kaine's desk.
FILE PHOTO BY WILL WALKER

As the *Hook* recently reported, a county laundromat owner **stepped into a bureaucratic quagmire** when he tried to install a rainwater harvesting system last year. Now a slew of environmental groups, political leaders, and business owners have stepped into the fray, firing off a **letter to Gov. Tim Kaine** this week asking that guidelines for the practice be "expeditiously developed."

Hydraulic Wash owner Charlie Smith says he was "run through the wringer" by the county plumbing inspection process, which thwarted his plans with outdated codes and regulations. Indeed, county building officials have admitted that one inspector was "uncomfortable with the concept" of rainwater harvesting.

Smith was eventually forced to seek approval for his plan from the local health department, but local health officials say it's the first time they have had to review such a request, and that they have no specific guidelines by which to judge the application.

"It has been a far more involved than I thought it was going to be," said Smith. "We didn't realize this was going to be a groundbreaking process."

Smith's struggles prompted the **Rivanna River Basin Commission** and the **Thomas Jefferson Soil & Water Conservation District** to draft the **letter to Gov. Kaine**. Over a dozen other environmental groups and public/private agencies signed on, including the **Southern Environmental Law Center**, the **Rivanna Conservation Society**, and the **Piedmont Group of the Sierra Club**.

In addition, unlikely bedfellows the **Rivanna Water and Sewer Authority** and **Citizens for a Sustainable Water Supply** joined Del. David Toscano, Charlottesville Mayor Dave Norris, and others in support of the letter.

"When the [Hook] article came out, it reminded us that we haven't seen any progress on this," says Leslie Middleton, executive director of The Rivanna River Basin Commission, "so we decided to elevate it to Governor's attention."

"That's pretty cool," says Smith, unaware that a letter to the Governor had been sent, but still in the process of trying to get approval from the health department. "I really appreciate that. It's time for this to happen."

While Middleton says environmental organizations like hers and the Thomas Jefferson Soil & Water Conservation District have been championing rain harvesting for years, clear guidelines for the practice in Virginia have been slow to materialize.

"The public is clamoring for this, and rightfully so," says Middleton. "It's an ancient practice that needs to be discovered. We hope the Governor realizes it has to happen, and it has to happen now."

Thomas Jefferson Soil & Water's Alyson Sappington says they've been studying and promoting rain harvesting locally since the early part of the decade, and that the lack of specific guidelines from the health department has been a persistent problem.

"This hasn't really been a priority for the health department," she says, "so it keeps getting postponed."

At issue is whether or not water collected for harvesting, specifically for laundry use, needs to be potable, i.e. drinkable. According to local health officials, under that standard, a system like Smith's would not be approved. In the city, new guidelines for rainwater harvesting issued in February simply prohibit the use of rainwater for laundry use, pending the release of new standards from the health department.

Over the years, Sappington says they've assisted homeowners with the installation of harvesting systems, but when it came time to hook them up, there was always a back and forth between building inspectors and the health department, each passing off responsibility to the other. When systems got approved, more often than not, says Sappington, it was because building inspectors finally signed off on them without deferring to the health department.

"Everybody is waiting for someone else to take responsibility," says Sappington. "It'd be comical if it wasn't so sad."

"In fairness to the health department, it's their job is to protect the public," says Middleton.

Indeed, Jeff McDaniel, the department's local representative, points out that Smith would be providing

water to the public, as opposed to a homeowner collecting it for their own use, "So we'll have to determine if there are any risks to the public," he says.

However, as Middleton and Sappington point out, rainwater already finds its way into our watershed, seeping into the ground and running off roofs, roads, and parking lots into storm drains that feed into rivers, creeks, and streams. While the ground naturally filters and purifies rainwater, contaminated runoff from man-made surfaces is a major source of pollution to waterways. That's why most cities, including Charlottesville, have storm-water management programs in place, which mostly educate the public on how to prevent the contamination of runoff at its source.

Ironically, the rain harvesting system Smith wants to install, from Roanoke-based [Rainwater Management Solutions](#), would do just that. According to company president David Crawford, his systems can purify water to potable levels if necessary.

"Although it's common sense to us to collect rainwater," says Middleton, "the regulatory system has its own mindset."

If Governor Kaine can break the bureaucratic logjam, rain harvesting might not only protect streams but also reduce the strain on the local water supply. For example, Sappington says that Soil & Water studied yearly water usage at Monticello High School recently, and using a simple calculation, determined that a rain harvesting system would provide twice as much water as the school currently uses.

Now imagine if all of Charlottesville's roofs captured rainwater. According to the city public works department, there are nearly 2,000 football fields worth of impervious surfaces (105 million square feet) in the city, a large portion of that roof space. Indeed, Sappington says that nearly 35,000 gallons of rainwater falls on a 30 x 40 foot roof in Central Virginia every year, nearly half the amount that a household typically uses.

Middleton says there has been no response yet from the Governor's office, but she's hopeful that rain harvesting's time has come.

"Ideally, we hope an interagency task-force is created, so everybody can be beating the same drum," she says. "Of course, we realize it won't happen overnight, but I have confidence it will happen, because it's a no-brainer."