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EDITORIALS

LI water needs state watchdog

A panel with enforcement power would help stop further aquifer contamination

Water is our most important natural resource. We drink it, bathe in it, wash with it. And every drop we use on Long Island comes from aquifers that lie far underground. So it was good news that the Suffolk County Legislature voted last week to create a bi-county commission on aquifer protection.

Now Nassau lawmakers need to pass similar legislation. And both county executives need to sign it so the commission can begin to do its work.

But that alone is not enough.

With our drinking water under threat as never before from fertilizers, pesticides and other contaminants, what is really needed to safeguard Long Island's water is a state commission with teeth. A commission with the authority to establish and enforce tougher standards and levy fines in an effort to reduce the amount of nitrogen pollution in our groundwater.

The data are too compelling and the need too urgent to wait.

Research paints a worrisome picture. Much of it was outlined in the recent Newsday-News 12 series on Long Island's water supply. Nitrogen in the aquifer that supplies most of our drinking water has increased 200 percent in Suffolk between 1987 and 2005, according to the latest data available; the concentration is well below federal standards for safety but the trend is alarming. Testing has detected 117 pesticides in our groundwater. The gasoline additive MTBE has been found in 330 wells in Suffolk alone. And last summer was the worst on record in the frequency and severity of nitrogen-



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A Suffolk County Water Authority chemist prepares a quality-control standard for testing drinking water.

fueled red tides, brown tides and rust tides spoiling our waterways.

So the vote in Suffolk, although a half-step, is encouraging. It is recognition by a group of leaders that a problem exists. And the bi-county commission's immediate charge — to produce a report on the state of the aquifer — is important. Although there is good water quality data for Suffolk as a whole, the same does not exist in Nassau, where information is compiled separately by dozens of water suppliers. What are the trends there on nitrogen pollution? The report also would be a benchmark for new policy recommendations. But it's not a substitute for action itself.

That would be done more effectively by a state commission overseeing the entire aquifer system. Water protection is a regional issue; we're all affected equally because we all draw from the same one source. So we need one watchdog. State Assemb. Robert Sweeney (D-Lindenhurst) has introduced legislation that would create a commission with teeth, require the Department of Environmental Conservation to devise a clean water plan, and set a much more restrictive standard for nitrogen in groundwater. The bill is due to be taken up next year but the political will to do anything controversial before elections in 2014 might be lacking. And it will be controversial, because the best solutions entail pain and sacrifice for everybody. Upgrading septic system technology, for example, would mean higher costs for homeowners forced to upgrade systems when buying homes. Upgrading sewer technology would be expensive for taxpayers. Reducing pesticide and fertilizer use has been resisted by farmers. But all are essential steps to cleaning our water and keeping it that way.

There will be a temptation to wait. But elected officials — local and statewide — should remember that Long Islanders care deeply about their environment and about their water. This is too important not to get right. **N**