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EPA Launches New Strategy to Promote Green Infrastructure

I've always liked the concept of green infrastructure, especially when compared to the "gray" of concrete and pavement. A meandering stream with a grassy bank is far preferable to a concrete lined channel, in my view. The stream might not convey stormwater with the same volume or speed, but the stream offers so much more to the environment and appeal of a city neighborhood.

While flood control is still a primary function of stormwater management, cities across the country are finally starting to see the value of water features in an urban setting. Streams that were channelized are being restored to their natural state, and some that had been hidden as simple conduits underground are being returned to the daylight.

To help accelerate the "green" movement, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is launching a new strategy to promote the use of green infrastructure by cities and towns to reduce stormwater runoff and the associated pollution that flows off city streets, parking lots and neighborhood lawns.

Green infrastructure can help reduce pollution to local waterways by treating rain where it falls and keeping polluted stormwater from entering sewer systems. Tools and techniques being promoted by EPA include green roofs, permeable materials, alternative designs for streets and buildings, trees, rain gardens and rain harvesting systems.

Along with helping slow the flow of rainwater green roofs can reduce a building's energy costs by 10 to 15 percent, according to EPA. Adding an extra 10 percent to an urban tree canopy can provide 5 to 10 percent energy savings from shading and windblocking. Green infrastructure also conserves energy by reducing the amount of stormwater entering combined collection and treatment systems, which reduces the amount of wastewater processed at treatment plants.

The agency's "Strategic Agenda to Protect Waters and Build More Livable Communities Through Green Infrastructure" outlines key near-term activities to help make green infrastructure an available tool for meeting Clean Water Act requirements in sewer permitting and plans, enforcement orders and consent decrees, and in other areas.

As part of its strategy, EPA will work with partners including local governments, watershed groups in 10 cities that have used green infrastructure and have plans for additional projects. Cities include Kansas City, MO; Austin, TX; and Washington, DC, just to name a few.

Strategic agenda action items include demonstrating how green infrastructure can be incorporated into combined sewer overflow (CSO) control plans and municipal separate storm sewer system (MS4) programs. EPA also plans to develop green infrastructure permitting and enforcement fact sheets and examples to assist communities.

In this era of tight funding, nothing gets done unless a solid business case can be made for the project. To that end, EPA's Green Infrastructure webpage will included updated information on sources of funding for projects including creative funding opportunities and a list of federal grant programs.

To be honest, given today's cost-cutting mood in Washington, I suspect this will be another Federal program going no where. Still, green Infrastructure is a wonderful concept and certainly worth pursuing as time and money allow.

For more information on EPA's green infrastructure agenda, visit http://epa.gov/greeninfrastructure.

James Laughlin, Editor

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