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The Concept of Water Quality Management Area: Its Application to the Laguna de Bay Region

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Abstract

The Laguna de Bay is one of the largest inland bodies of water in Southeast Asia and the largest in the Philippines. The lake watershed comprises 24 micro-watersheds encompassing 66 local government units and where over 50 water-related government entities operate. The Lake, while supporting a range of uses and holds the greatest potential as source of domestic water supply including drinking water, is confronted with environmental threats. As the apex institution for managing and coordinating the development of the lake and its watershed, the Laguna Lake Development Authority (LLDA), operates under a unique legal and institutional framework as well as an approach that are anchored on the concept and principle of integrated watershed believing that only the watershed perspective can fully account for the complexity of bio-physical, socio-cultural, economic, political and political factors that impact on the natural environment. Therefore, the lake's 24 micro-watersheds represent LLDA's basic units for planning and implementation of environmental improvement and conservation measures.

LLDA's watershed approach has been given more impetus with the enactment of the Clean Water Act under Republic Act 9725, undoubtedly a milestone Philippine legislation. In relation to the Charter of the LLDA, it recognizes the uniqueness of the Laguna de Bay watershed as a distinct ecosystem. The law designates the Laguna de Bay Region as one Water Quality Management Area (WQMA) under the administration of the Authority in accordance with its Charter (RA 4850 as amended). WQMA as used in the CWA refers to "physiographic units such as watershed, river basins or water resources regions ... having similar hydrological, biological and meteorological or geographic conditions which affect the physico-chemical, biological and bacteriological reactions and diffusions of pollutants in the water bodies". It may also refer to a cluster of LGUs which "share common interest or face similar development programs, prospects, or problems." Compared to the other concepts of WQMA in the law,

the Laguna de Bay watershed fits well, from the administrative and technical viewpoints, into the watershed-focused WQMA as envisioned in the CWA.

However, the CWA sets the conditions for this legal framework to be operationalized in the Laguna de Bay Region: (i) the standards promulgated and the wastewater charge system established under this Act shall be enforced in the Laguna de Bay WQMA; (ii) formulate a WQMA Action Plan that will embody the strategies to coordinate policies necessary for the effective implementation of the CWA based on the established framework and monitoring the compliance to the plan; and (iii) structurally, creation of multi-sectoral group to effect water quality surveillance and monitoring network, and a Technical Secretariat to provide technical support to the Governing Board. For purposes of the CWA, the LLDA Board of Directors serves as the WQMA Governing Board. In addition to LLDA's best practices and lessons learned over a period of more than 35 years on natural resources and watershed co-management, currently underway are interventions and measures to enable the LLDA to transit into a CWA-mandated WQMA, as yet another precedent-setting and trailblazing undertaking in the field of integrated watershed management as a re-engineered LLDA.