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May 16, 2013

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Championing Drinking Water Protection for a Healthy and Vibrant Region

The River Alert Information Network (RAIN), announces a new partner in drinking water protection in western PA and northern West Virginia. Penn's Corner Conservancy Charitable Trust, Inc., a regionally-focused nonprofit group comprised of urban and rural planners, elected officials, and conservation organizations, will partner with RAIN to augment its current Early Warning System (EWS) of twenty-nine (29) river monitoring stations designed to identify river pollution in the Upper Ohio Basin. With access to near real-time water quality data, water treatment system officials can take prompt and appropriate action should a pollution event occur, thereby further ensuring safe and clean drinking water for the millions in the region. A functioning and reliable EWS, along with an emphasis on fostering regional partnerships to secure resources and deliver needed services and programs, will maximize RAIN's fifty-one public water suppliers and other partners' efforts to detect, report, and address incidents of industrial pollution, abandoned mine drainage, pollution from major storms, spills of oil or natural gas, algae blooms from sewage or agricultural fertilizer runoff, or intentional, illegal acts of pollution.

"Access to enough clean water and safe drinking water is an essential ingredient to healthy, vibrant, and prosperous communities," said RAIN Chair, Gina Cyprch, a microbiologist with the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority. In western PA communities, about 2 million residents rely on the Allegheny, Monongahela, Youghiogheny, Shenango, Beaver, and Ohio rivers as their source of drinking water. These mighty rivers also make the region's industrial and manufacturing strength possible. But, industrialization and urban and suburban development can be a threat to clean water when spills or runoff enter the waters in the region. "The potential for contamination of drinking water, coupled with the high cost of treating water and locating and developing alternate water sources, make it imperative for our region to think proactively and collaboratively," noted Cyprych.

Working closely with RAIN, Penn's Corner will provide both technical advisement and financial sponsorship services for RAIN. "As a promoter and facilitator of partnerships, our organization will identify tools and other resources to help RAIN and its stakeholders meet its goals to protect source water and enhance water quality," said Penn's Corner Chair, Doniele Russell. Russell is a land use/greenways planner for Lawrence and Butler Counties. Penn's Corner's legacy to the region is its partnership with hundreds of communities working on natural resources protection and conservation in the nine county region during the past thirty five years.

To further increase its capacity to help systems achieve local source water protection, RAIN has hired Sherene Hess, an environmental and natural resources protection specialist for more than twenty years, to coordinate source water protection projects and activities for RAIN. Hess brings a broad range of experience in industrial pollution control, recycling and solid waste management, drinking water and watershed conservation and protection, air quality management, land conservation and forest management, and community development, especially in rural areas, to RAIN. Hess' background will be a benefit to a region that is so diverse in geography and community concerns.

One of RAIN's new initiatives is the launch of its improved and enhanced website, rainmatters.org. Designed in collaboration with partner, Steelcoast Creative, LLC, this online tool is accessible to anyone interested in protecting the quality of the region's rivers. Featuring an interactive map that interfaces with the EWS's near real-time data, RAIN and its community partners will better protect public health and assure a navigable and usable water supply for industry and businesses in the region. Pete Staddler, Managing Partner at Steelcoast, notes that "Today, information is being transmitted faster all the time - in all mediums - and we expect that it's available 24/7 no matter where we are. Our close collaboration with RAIN and its partners has helped craft an interactive forward-thinking site that will help RAIN and Penn's Corner stay ahead of the curve to provide an invaluable public service to our region."

In addition to a state of the art EWS, RAIN is a leader in source water protection planning, aiming to prevent contamination of the region's rivers. Working with partners to advocate for policies and programs that champion source water protection as a priority, RAIN will feature source water protection tools and resources on the website and will facilitate opportunities for community leaders, planners, businesses and citizens to join the discussion on how to protect, conserve and manage our shared water resources in the region to the benefit of all.