

AGRICULTURAL BMPS

water

Healthy Farms, Healthy Rivers

Statement of the Issue

As part of the regional Chesapeake 2000 Agreement, Virginia committed to reduce nutrient pollution going into the Chesapeake Bay sufficiently to remove the Bay and its tidal tributaries from the federal list of impaired waters. To achieve this goal, Virginia must reduce the amount of excess nitrogen and phosphorus going into the Bay watershed by 27 million pounds annually from point sources (municipal and industrial wastewater treatment facilities) and nonpoint sources (runoff from land).

Farm runoff contributes nearly a third of the excess nitrogen and phosphorus pollution to Virginia rivers and the Bay. Fortunately, proven conservation techniques, also called best management practices (BMPs), can prevent this runoff from leaving fields and entering surface and ground waters. The state has identified five priority practices that could achieve nearly 60% of the needed runoff reductions.

Though many Virginia farmers use BMPs, the sometimes substantial cost of implementing them is a major barrier to widespread use. State and federal cost-share programs exist to help farmers pay for conservation practices, but historically such programs have been significantly underfunded. Every year, many Virginia farmers who apply to participate in state cost-share programs are turned away because of a shortage of funds.

Background

Virginia in recent years has made great strides toward reducing point source nutrient pollution by developing regulatory programs and providing close to \$1 billion to upgrade local wastewater treatment plants. These actions should reduce nitrogen pollution by at least 4 million pounds annually. However, to achieve Virginia's water quality goals and remove the Bay from the im-

paired waters list, great effort also is needed to reduce nonpoint sources of excess nitrogen, especially runoff from farmland.

Agricultural runoff accounts for much of the nutrient excess entering Virginia's rivers and the Chesapeake Bay (approximately 31% of the nitrogen and 36% of Virginia's phosphorus load). Farm BMPs, can prevent nitrogen and phosphorus from reaching surface and ground waters. The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation has identified five priority practices that, if used on farms throughout Virginia's part of the Bay watershed, could achieve nearly 60% of the needed runoff reductions. These priority BMPs are nutrient management plans, forest and grass riparian buffers, stream bank fencing to block livestock access, cover crops, and continuous no-till.

Across the Commonwealth, farmers actively seek to adopt these best management practices,

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and many have already done so. However, installation and technical assistance costs are major barriers. Unlike other regions of the country dominated by large agricultural production operations, the average Virginia farm size is 181 acres, and the average annual farm income is about \$49,000 per year. Given the inherent risks associated with farming (weather, commodity prices, etc.), farmers do not always have a predictable income; one year's profits may cover future years

Recommendations: Agricultural BMPs

The Commonwealth should make a strong financial commitment to the state's water quality goals and to the farming community by fully funding agricultural cost-share needs. The future of agriculture in this region and the future of Virginia and the Chesapeake Bay are inextricably linked. We cannot afford to continue to turn away or discourage farmers from being good stewards of their land and the Commonwealth's waters. If we provide this much needed help, farmers can help us all restore our rivers, streams, and estuaries.

when the farm operates at a loss.

State and federal cost-share programs that help farmers pay for conservation practices have been significantly under-funded. For example, one of every three Virginia farmers applying for state and federal cost-share are turned away because of a lack of funds. Widespread awareness of this significant state funding shortfall discourages many farmers from applying for cost-share assistance.

Historically state cost-share programs have been funded only when there is a state budget surplus. But farmers are expected to protect water quality in good budget years as well as bad, and Virginians need clean water every day. For the last two years, the Governor and the General Assembly have provided an additional \$20 million for agricultural cost-share programs. Unfortunately this only covers approximately 1/5 of the \$100 million needed each year for the program. State cost-share programs must be consistently and adequately funded every year.



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