STORMWATER POLLUTION

water

Keeping Dirty Runoff out of Rivers

Statement of the Issue

The clean up of Virginia's rivers and the Chesapeake Bay is being overwhelmed by stormwater pollution—the pollution that runs off of our urban and suburban communities when it rains. This past year, an improved stormwater management program was established by the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) that will allow Virginia to better accommodate both future urbanization and healthy waters. In the upcoming session of the Virginia General Assembly there may be attempts to rescind, weaken, or delay the implementation of much needed stormwater pollution reductions.

Background

Stormwater comes from rain and snowmelt that runs off rooftops, driveways, streets, construction sites, and other hard or "impervious" surfaces and lawns that make up urban and suburban development. Development disrupts the natural features of the landscape by removing vegetation, compacting soil, and preventing rainwater from soaking into the ground. This allows stormwater to quickly flow into waterways where it:

- Introduces harmful pollutants, including sediment, nutrients, bacteria, pesticides, and metals;
- Blocks sunlight that underwater grasses need to survive;
- Reduces oxygen and water clarity required by fish, crabs, and other aquatic life;
- Smothers insect larvae, fish eggs, oysters, and other bottom-dwellers;
- Damages stream banks, navigation channels, and drinking water reservoirs; and
- Harms seafood and tourist industries, property values, public health, and adds to cleanup costs.

Recent reports show that efforts to clean the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries are losing ground specifically because increased stormwater pollution is offsetting progress being made from point sources, agriculture, and other sources. (Figure 1)

- Roughly 25% of nutrient and sediment pollution to the Bay is from developed lands—a 15% increase since 1985.
- Approximately 1,570 stream miles in the Bay watershed are polluted because of stormwater.
- Unless corrected, stormwater problems will only get worse if land development in the watershed continues to outpace population growth—as it did by five times from 1990 to 2000!

For over three years the Commonwealth has been working to update and improve its stormwater management regulations. In particular, regu-

Recommendations: Stormwater Pollution

Oppose any legislative proposals that seek to rescind, weaken, or delay the recent improvements to Virginia's stormwater program and the attendant pollution reductions that are necessary to meet the requirements to restore and protect water quality under the forthcoming Bay TMDL clean up plan, Virginia's Water Quality Standards, and the Clean Water Act.

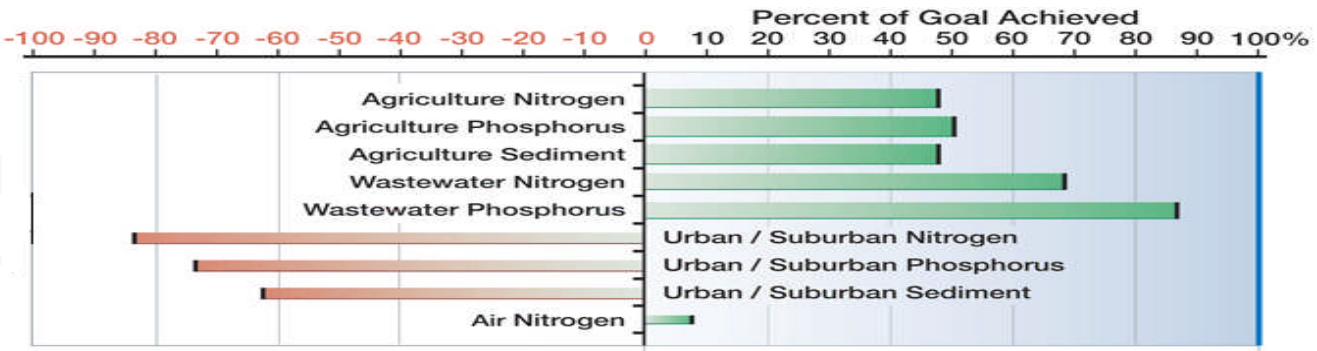

Figure 1: Percent of Chesapeake Bay clean up goals achieved. Urban and suburban stormwater are going backwards. (Credit: Chesapeake Bay Program)

lations developed by an expert committee were proposed in June 2009 that would address completed residential and commercial developments ("post-construction regulations") that are a vast improvement over existing programs. Those improvements include:

- A "no net impact" in phosphorus pollution standard for newly developed lands.
- Requirements to better manage stormwater discharge speed and volume that will prevent stream channel erosion, sedimentation, flooding, and property damage.
- Incentives for use of Low Impact Development (LID) techniques that promote preservation of native vegetation, soaking rainwater into the soil, and water recycling.
- New provisions that are based on the most current science, are fully attainable on site, and are consistent with Virginia's water quality goals and commitments.
- Flexibility for developers and localities to obtain pollution reductions "off site" to ensure that compliance costs are not viewed as excessive or an incentive for urban sprawl.

Improved stormwater regulations will save money long-term by capturing the true "lifetime" costs of development up front, preserving benefits to sectors of the economy that rely on clean water, decreasing pollution mitigation costs, and lessening the burden on communities and citizens that are disproportionally affected by stormwater pollution.

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