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Pennsylvania Unveils Comprehensive Strategy to Improve Water Quality in state and Chesapeake Bay Watershed

Strategy recognizes two key, co-equal goals for success: clean water and viable farms

Elizabethtown, PA – After 30 years of work that has prevented millions of pounds of pollutants from reaching Pennsylvania’s waterways and the Chesapeake Bay, the commonwealth continues to face immense pressure from the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to improve water quality. In order to meet those obligations, Pennsylvania today unveiled a comprehensive strategy to “reboot” the state’s efforts to improve water quality in the commonwealth and the bay.

The new plan, developed jointly by the Pennsylvania departments of Agriculture, Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), and Environmental Protection (DEP), as well as the State Conservation Commission brings new focus to the state’s efforts to help protect the Chesapeake Bay while emphasizing the need for balance and resilience. The strategy relies on a mix of technical and financial assistance for farmers, technology, expanded data gathering, improved program coordination and capacity and – only when necessary – stronger enforcement and compliance measures.

“This is an important issue to the future of agriculture in Pennsylvania and throughout the watershed, and must be managed to achieve the co-equal goals of having both clean water and viable farms,” said Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding. “The agriculture industry is responsible for contributing three-quarters of the total nutrient reductions expected of states by 2025. That’s a sizeable sum, and no small task, but we know there are countless farmers who are doing their part. Part of the problem is that Pennsylvania is not getting full credit for the work we are doing. This plan sets out to rectify that, plus give those farmers who need help or encouragement the incentives to assist them. We all have a role here and agriculture stands ready to be part of the solution.”

“Pennsylvania has not met the EPA’s requirements to reduce water pollution under the requirements of federal court orders and regulations,” said DEP Secretary John Quigley. “The Wolf administration is working to focus and increase resources and technical assistance, reinvigorate partnerships, and create a culture of compliance in protecting Pennsylvania’s water quality, and by virtue of that, the quality of the Chesapeake Bay.”

“Of the many best management practices that improve the quality of waters and habitats in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, the single best may be the restoration of riparian forest buffers along stream banks to provide critical barriers between polluting landscapes and receiving waterways,” DCNR Secretary Cindy Dunn said. “We are renewing our focus on increasing forest buffers in Pennsylvania by developing a comprehensive approach to provide funding, training, and outreach to farmers and landowners.”

The new plan is in response to the federal Clean Water Act, court orders and regulations finalized by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in December 2010 that impose a total maximum daily load, or TMDL, that require Pennsylvania to reduce annual discharges of

nitrogen, phosphorous and sediment entering the bay watershed in order to meet water quality standards by 2025.

The administration's comprehensive strategy centers around six elements:

- Put high-impact, low-cost Best Management Practices (BMPs) on the ground, and quantify undocumented BMPs in watersheds impaired by agriculture or stormwater.
- Improve reporting, record keeping and data systems to provide better and more accessible documentation.
- Address nutrient reduction by meeting EPA's goal of inspecting 10 percent of farms in the watershed, ensuring development and use of manure management and agricultural erosion and sediment control plans, and enforcement for non-compliance.
- Identify legislative, programmatic or regulatory changes to provide the additional tools and resources necessary to meet federal pollution reduction goals by 2025.
- Obtain additional resources for water quality improvement.
- Establish a Chesapeake Bay Office to coordinate the development, implementation and funding of the commonwealth's Chesapeake Bay efforts.

Redding noted the administration has been actively engaging stakeholders as it developed this plan, and it has sought additional resources from the federal government, such as through the United States Department of Agriculture's Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The administration has been engaging with EPA, conservation districts and institutions of higher education, including Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences to discuss the most effective water quality improvement strategies. The administration has also been working with farm organizations to assist in capturing on-the-farm data of best management practices on farms throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Capturing this data is essential to Pennsylvania receiving full credit in the EPA's model, which is used to measure progress toward pollution reduction goals.

DCNR's Bureau of Forestry will lead an effort to work with numerous agencies, partners and landowners to expand forest buffers along waterways in the commonwealth.

Between 1985 and 2013, Pennsylvania has made significant strides, reducing yearly nitrogen loads by more than 11.5 million pounds, phosphorous by 1.46 million pounds, and sediment by nearly 434 million pounds. These reductions – the result of more than \$4 billion being directed toward Chesapeake Bay restoration during that period through loan and grant programs -- equate to a 25 percent reduction in phosphorous, a six percent reduction in nitrogen, and a nearly 15 percent reduction in sediment.

Despite this progress, achievements to date have been deemed insufficient by the EPA to meet water quality expectations, as reported by the federal government's most recent interim evaluation, released in June 2015. According to that assessment, Pennsylvania is on target to meet its 2017 TMDL goal for phosphorus, but significantly behind targets for nitrogen and sediment reductions. Excess phosphorus, nitrogen and sediments are the leading causes of bay degradation, and Pennsylvania is one of six states obliged to achieve nutrient reduction goals. The state must reduce nitrogen loads by another 31.4 million pounds, phosphorous by an additional one million pounds, and sediment by another 648 million pounds by the TMDL's 2025 target.

Because of Pennsylvania's lack of attainment in meeting interim goals, last month, the EPA advised DEP that it was withholding \$2.9 million in funding, and will consider taking additional

actions that increase the federal agency's role in inspections, permitting and compliance, if progress is lacking.

More than half of Pennsylvania's land area drains into the Chesapeake Bay, with the Susquehanna River being the largest tributary in the watershed. The Susquehanna River provides 90 percent of the freshwater that flows into the upper bay region and half of the total flow into the entire estuary.

For more information on Pennsylvania's Chesapeake Bay Program, visit www.dep.pa.gov and search "Chesapeake Bay Program."

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