



Maryland Farmers are doing their part for the Bay

For Immediate Release

Nearly 500,000 acres of farmland will be planted with environmentally protective crops as part of the 2008 cover crop program. This is one of the largest enrollments on record.

Farmers who participate in the program will plant small grains such as wheat, barley, oats and rye after they harvest their corn and soybean crops. To qualify for state funding to help defray some of the cost, farmers must plant the crops by November 5th to make sure the plants are growing and using any excess nutrients left in the soil after the fall crop is harvested. Maryland's cover crop program is one example of the extraordinary efforts that farmers and the state have taken to protect the Chesapeake Bay.

"Farmers are constantly looking for ways to improve their management of the soil to ensure better crops in future years and to protect our water resources," said Harry Moreland III President of Caroline County Farm Bureau. "Eastern shore farmers are proud of the fact that they adopt more conservation practices than any other group of farmers in the Bay Watershed and probably in the nation."

Over the past 23 years, Maryland farmers have installed over 21,000 projects on farms to improve the way crops use nutrients and to prevent unintended movement by nitrogen and phosphorus into the Bay. Farmers spent \$12 million of their own money combined with state funding to plant grass and tree buffers, to construct poultry litter and manure storage structures, to change the direction of rain water flowing off the roof tops of barns and to install hundreds of other projects. Most of these upgrades were added with the understanding that they would not improve the profitability of the farm. "Our profit margin is very slim," said Moreland. "We install buffer strips and run-off diversions knowing that it won't increase our profits. We are competing against farmers in other states and other countries who don't incur these costs. But we do it because it's the right thing to do and we want to protect and improve the Chesapeake Bay."

Maryland farmers are working overtime to identify new practices they can adopt that will increase protection of the Bay while allowing them to stay economically viable. Mike Phipps, President of the Maryland Farm Bureau, has organized meetings with scientists and Bay protection organizations across watershed. "What we've found is that Maryland farmers have been and continue to do an excellent job," he said.

“In meeting with those who study the Bay we found that the Bay reached its peak for productive potential from the life-enhancing nutrients of nitrogen and phosphorus during the World War II era,” Phipps explained. “Incidentally, Maryland farmers had begun installing Best Management Practices through their Soil and Water Conservation Districts nearly 10 years before – decades before the Bay was identified as having water quality problems.”

EPA figures show that while agricultural nutrients are often cited as the leading cause of trouble in the Bay, 93 percent of the nitrogen and 92 percent of the phosphorus comes from sources other than Maryland farms. “You could stop all of the farming in Maryland and still not make a significant reduction in Bay nutrients,” said Phipps. “And, if you replaced farms with housing developments you are likely to make the problem worse.”

Maryland farmers lead the nation and the watershed in efforts taken to reduce nutrient runoff. Besides the cover crop program, one of the most effective practices adopted in Maryland is no-till farming. The vast majority of Maryland crops are no-tilled, allowing the firm ground and the stubble of last year’s crops to prevent soil and nutrient runoff.

Farmers are doing as much in rural areas to prevent nutrient loss as manufacturers and wastewater treatment plants are doing in urban areas. Many are doing much more. And they continue to be frustrated by inaccurate statements made in the press that lead the public to believe they are shirking their responsibilities.

Some of the frustration comes from state and federal reports that analyze all of the sources of Bay nutrients and then conclude that funding programs to reduce nutrients on farms is the most cost effective approach. There are significant nutrient losses occurring in cities and municipalities throughout the watershed. Analysts always conclude, however, that digging up roads and sidewalks and completely replacing waste water treatment systems is cost prohibitive. The general public is then left to believe that farms are the primary source of Bay nutrients. The farm community has long advocated a comprehensive approach to Bay cleanup – where every sector of the state does its part.

Additional inaccurate statements that appear in the press and around conference room tables include:

Inaccurate Statement – Former state Senator Gerald Winegrad tells audiences that farmers are not regulated and are only using “voluntary” approaches to manage nutrients.

Fact – Under the 1998 Water Quality Improvement Act, all Maryland farmers are required to have a Certified Nutrient Management Plan. The plan is written by an individual who must attend classes and take a certification exam to show agronomic and nutrient expertise. Farmers complete their plan and submit annual updates with the Maryland Department of Agriculture. The enforcement agency’s inspectors visit farms to make sure farmers have and are using their plans according to the specifications. MDA inspection rates mirror the inspection rates of MDE with industry and waste water treatment plant operators.

Inaccurate Statement - Attorney General Doug Gansler has repeatedly said that farmers are dumping poultry litter directly into the Bay. He tells his audiences that there is no current use for the “waste” product.

Fact: Maryland farmers are recycling poultry litter. They are using the organic nutrients in the litter to fertilize crops just like farmers have done for decades. Poultry litter is applied based on the nutrient needs of the plants that will be grown and is certainly not “dumped” in the Bay and its tributaries. Using poultry litter as fertilizer helps to keep farms sustainable. The cost of chemical fertilizers continues to increase. Organic fertilizer applied based on crop needs is cost effective and beneficial to the soil.