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Farmers making progress, despite environmental claims

Maryland's family farms have a strong and documented record of pollution prevention and are among the most regulated businesses in the region. Repeated recent attacks by Environment Maryland are an attempt to mischaracterize the work of farmers and will not help solve Chesapeake Bay nutrient issues.

Farmers throughout the region rely on chicken manure, a locally produced organic fertilizer. Under strict state-sanctioned nutrient management plans that dictate where, how often and in what quantities, farmers apply this organic fertilizer to their land to produce food. Plans are guided by university and government recommendations and the requirements are the strictest in the nation.

Chicken manure is a valuable resource for farmers and is in short supply. It is applied to soil-tested land and adds micronutrients to the soil that help increase plant growth and production. The organic material in the litter also helps with water retention and reduces the movement of nutrients to waters of the state. According to the EPA-approved December 2010 Maryland Chesapeake Bay Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP), Maryland chicken manure is responsible for just six percent of the nitrogen entering the bay from all Maryland sources.

If farmers do not use the organic locally produced fertilizer, they have to use an equal amount of commercial fertilizer produced using fossil fuels and shipped hundreds of miles to their farm. The carbon foot print of that is significant and wasteful when a local resource exists.

In addition to the mandated nutrient management plans, farmers were given a two-year Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP) goal from the government to further reduce unintentional run-off. They are ahead of schedule, currently meeting 120 percent of those goals.

"Farmers in every county are working with their local WIP planning group and are committed to implement the Best Management Plan options laid out in each county," said Maryland Farm Bureau President Patricia Langenfelder. "New regulatory proposals

short-circuit the TMDL/WIP process. Farmers are frustrated by the whittling away of their ability to make farm-specific decisions to be productive while meeting nutrient reduction goals. The speed at which Maryland is placing mandates and restricting farm practices makes it impossible for good scientific research and cost/benefit analysis to be conducted.”

While much focus continues to fall on farmers and their non-point source pollution, the Maryland Department of Environment had reports of more than 1.5 billion gallons of wastewater discharged directly into the waters of the state through sewage treatment plants’ combined sewer overflows and sanitary sewer overflows – just in 2011 in Maryland.

Unlike the sewage treatment plants and factories, where installed new practices have an instant impact, non-point source pollution reduction programs such as on farmland take longer to shown improvements. Scientists repeatedly have said that improvements made on farm fields might not show results for years or decades.

There are many bay cleanup efforts underway. Farmers are on track and must be given an opportunity to achieve the goals set out without constant change in the rules. “We ask that all citizens keep in mind that nutrients – fertilizer in the organic or commercial form – are necessary to grow food. We simply cannot stop producing food for our neighbors here and across the world,” Langenfelder said.

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