

AGRICULTURAL BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Statement of the Issue

Farm runoff contributes significantly to the excess nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment pollution to Virginia rivers and the Bay. Fortunately conservation techniques, also called best management practices (BMPs), can prevent this runoff from leaving fields, and polluting our water.

Many Virginia farmers use BMPs already; however 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 under-funded. Every year, many Virginia farmers who apply to participate in state cost-share programs are turned away because of a shortage of funds.

Background

Agricultural runoff accounts for much of the nutrient excess entering Virginia's rivers and the Chesapeake Bay. Approximately 20% of the nitrogen, 42% of phosphorus and 41% of the sediment load comes from Virginia agriculture. Farm BMPs including nutrient management plans, forest and grass riparian buffers, stream bank fencing to block livestock access, cover crops, continuous no-till, and many more can prevent these pollutants from reaching surface and ground waters.

Across the Commonwealth, farmers actively seek to adopt these practices, and many have already done so. However, installation costs and adequate technical assistance are major barriers. Unlike other regions of the country dominated by large agricultural production operations, the average Virginia farm size is 171 acres, and the

average annual farm income is about \$61,000 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 when the farm operates at a loss. Cost-share is the necessary bridge that farmers need so they can do their part to protect Virginia's water resources.

Furthermore, as part of its obligation to help restore the Chesapeake Bay, Virginia has developed a Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP) which is a road map for achieving necessary reductions in pollution. This plan lays out a timeline for implementing BMPs, and includes specific goals set every 2 years, called milestones. It will be necessary for cost-share funding to match the needs that are outlined in the WIP. If the milestone goals are not met through these voluntary actions, the WIP also outlines possible regulatory action Virginia might be forced to take. Avoiding this regulatory action will require adequate cost-share funding and some programmatic changes.



In 2011 the General Assembly passed enabling legislation for Resource Management Plans (RMP), which is one of the programmatic changes the WIP identifies. The RMP was developed to be a vehicle to deliver more BMP implementation. If it and other changes are the vehicles for BMP implementation, cost-share is the fuel. Without it the RMP and the other changes will fail to meet the milestone goals.

AG BMP RECOMMENDATIONS

The future of agriculture in Virginia and the future of the Commonwealth's rivers 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 water resources. If we provide this much needed help, farmers can help us all protect and restore our rivers, streams, and estuaries.

The Commonwealth should make a strong financial commitment to the state's water quality goals and to the farming community by:

- Allocating sufficient funding to agricultural best management practices. Statewide, this is estimated to be roughly \$67 million in state cost share funds for fiscal year 2013, and \$71 million in fiscal year 2014.
- Providing adequate funding for technical assistance, as it is a role typically performed by state agencies, critical in leveraging landowner willingness.

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With the help of cost-share, last year Virginia farmers installed over 10,000 BMPs and over 2million pounds of nitrogen were prevented from polluting Virginia's waters. However, historically

state cost-share programs have been funded only when there is a state budget surplus. Farmers are expected to protect water quality in good budget years as well as bad, and Virginians need clean water every day. Thus, state cost-share programs must be consistently and adequately funded every year, and not contingent on a budget surplus.

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