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ENVIRO MATTERS

SEPTIC SYSTEM UPGRADE PLAN IS UNDERWAY

In the most innovative environmental legislation in over 25 years, the Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund (Senate Bill 320) was created to upgrade the 66 largest wastewater treatment plants in the Bay watershed, upgrade septic systems in critical areas, and encourage cover crops on agricultural land. Excess loading of nutrients, like nitrogen and phosphorus, lead to degraded water quality, which negatively impact the ecology of the Bay and its tributaries.

Almost one in five Marylanders dispose of their sewage in onsite sewage disposal systems (OSDS), sometimes referred to as septic systems. Over the years, OSDS technology has evolved to protect water quality, and in this program, systems that may fail or not be as protective will be replaced by best available technology (BAT).

Under the Bay Restoration Fund, there are two dedicated funds created and administered by the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE). One, financed by sewage treatment plant users, will raise \$60 million per year to upgrade Maryland's wastewater treatment plants to achieve enhanced nutrient removal (ENR). A second, financed by users of onsite sewage disposal systems will raise \$12.6 million per year to upgrade septic systems and implement cover crop activities.

Funding Eligibility

Priority is given to failing septic systems in the Critical Area, which is the 1,000-foot buffer around the Chesapeake Bay shoreline. Up to 100 percent of the cost is for upgrading existing systems to best available technology for nitrogen removal. The cost difference between conventional systems and one that uses best available technology for nitrogen removal is also eligible for funding.

Onsite Sewage Disposal Systems Fund

Collections began the first of this year for surcharges on sewer bills and on water bills for septic system users. Effective October 1, 2005, a \$30 annual fee will be collected from each home served by a septic system. As of June 30, 2005, over \$156,000 was collected from septic users, of which 60 percent of the funds will be allocated for septic system upgrades. Forty percent of the funds will be used for cover crop activities. There are over 420,000 septic systems in Maryland. State and local agencies started the process of identifying the owners' addresses to enable billing of OSDS users. The next steps involve educating OSDS users regarding the program and its available funds.

Approximately \$6.5 million will become available to upgrade over 600 systems annually. A technical workgroup, including State and local government and industry representatives are fast at work making determinations as to the Best Available Technology for nitrogen removal. The Maryland Department of Agriculture will implement cover crop activities to provide funding to farmers to plant small grain crops that are ideal for absorbing excess nutrients and are resistant to erosion. The Bay Restoration Fund will pay farmers to plant an estimated 125,000 acres of farmland with cover crops each year.

Bay Restoration Fund Benefits

By 2010, when all is said and done, the \$750 million revenue generated Bay Restoration Fund will allow Maryland to achieve over one-third of the necessary nutrient reductions to meet the Chesapeake Bay 2000 Agreement. Maryland is a leader in protecting the Chesapeake Bay for its ecological, economic and cultural values for future generations.



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