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ENVIRO MATTERS

Maryland's Plan to Clean Up the Chesapeake - Exploring the Bay Restoration Fund

The Chesapeake Bay is on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Impaired Waters List for a reason. Nutrient loads to Maryland streams and waterways are currently in excess of 50 million pounds of nitrogen per year, which must be reduced by 20 million pounds per year to meet Maryland's Bay Agreement commitment. Governor Ehrlich's Bay Restoration Fund (BRF) was created to reduce the volume of nutrients into the Bay and its tributaries by upgrading waste water treatment plants and on-site sewage disposal systems (OSDS) and planting cover crops on agricultural land throughout the entire state.

No Matter Where You Are

If you think about it, almost all of the state's non-tidal rivers and streams are contributing nutrients into the 10 major tributary basins. Concern about nitrogen pollution spans from the obvious – Chesapeake Bay shellfish harvesting waters – to the less evident – introduction to the trout streams of Western Maryland. As of January 31, 2006, the BRF has awarded $30 million to upgrade nine sewage treatment plants. The fund has also committed $3.6 million to plant nearly 135,000 acres of cover crops, including 26,000 acres on Western Maryland farms, which will prevent more than one million pounds of nitrogen from entering the Bay and its tributaries. No matter how far Marylanders live from the actual Chesapeake Bay, most of Maryland's streams and rivers discharge nutrients to the Bay, the Atlantic Ocean, and even our lakes in Western Maryland, causing harmful algae growth. That kills aquatic wildlife.

All but three jurisdictions have billed septic system property owners the $30 annual Bay Restoration Fund fee. The remaining three jurisdictions plan to bill by July 2006. To apply for a financial hardship exemption, residents may contact their water and sewer billing authority, or local treasurers office. The BRF requires that priority be given to failing systems in the Critical Area (within 1000 feet of all tidal portions of the Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays), but all property owners are eligible and can benefit and improve water quality in their own backyard streams and waterways. As assessments are conducted, more priority areas may be identified in all corners of the state.

Best Available Technology

The Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) has implemented a Best Available Technology (BAT) Verification Program. This program ensures that grant eligible systems will significantly reduce nitrogen levels over traditional systems. The BAT protocol was developed in cooperation with industry experts, concerned citizen groups, and other state and local government agencies.

Protecting Public Health - and the Bay

MDE will shortly release a Request for Proposals to provide grants for upgrading OSDS to BAT for removing nitrogen. The highest priority is upgrading failing systems in the critical area but we also expect to release funds to areas of the state needing more groundwater protection.

MARYLAND

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