



Backgrounder

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July 23, 2015

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary, US Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

7/23 EC Draft

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

First, we commend you for your leadership in ensuring a strong partnership between our states and the United States Department of Agriculture. Your efforts to expand conservation practices on farms throughout our watersheds have helped greatly in our effort to protect and restore the nation's premier watershed, the Chesapeake Bay.

Within the 64,000 square miles of the Bay watershed, agriculture is the largest industry. Collectively, our states' Watershed Implementation Plans (WIPs) to meet the Chesapeake Bay TMDL call for agriculture to contribute fully three-quarters of our total nutrient load reductions. By far, agriculture provides the greatest opportunity for achieving restoration goals.

As we near the 2017 Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) deadline to have the necessary practices in place to achieve 60 percent of 2025 goal, there is renewed interest in near-stream practices, such as forest buffers, grass buffers and livestock stream exclusion that have direct benefits to water quality both in the Bay and locally, while also benefitting farmers and their livestock through improved herd health. We are relying on these riparian practices alone to achieve over 18 percent of the nitrogen, 16 percent of the phosphorus, and 22 percent of the sediment goals for the Bay TMDL.

As you prepare your next set of federal milestones under the Chesapeake Bay Executive Order, we respectfully offer a few suggestions for program modifications that will accelerate implementation of these critical riparian practices and facilitate your achievement of USDA's four million acre goal for new conservation. Our recommendations are included as an attachment to this letter.

The next three years are a critical period under the TMDL as we conduct the 2017 Midpoint Assessment and develop Phase 3 of our WIPs. As each of our states takes action to achieve its share of reductions, we look forward to working with you on these five proposed modifications.

As you address these issues, please coordinate with, Secretary Molly Ward, Chair of the Bay Program's Principals' Staff Committee at Molly.Ward@governor.virginia.gov or 804-786-0044. She will make sure that our states are kept informed. We look forward to working with you to ensure that our partnership is as strong as possible.

Sincerely,

Members of the Chesapeake Executive Council

The Honorable Terence R. McAuliffe, Governor, Commonwealth of Virginia (EC Chair)

The Honorable L. Scott Lingamfelter, Chairman, Chesapeake Bay Commission

The Honorable Jack A. Markell, Governor, State of Delaware

The Honorable Muriel Bowser, Mayor, District of Columbia

The Honorable Lawrence J. Hogan Jr., Governor, State of Maryland

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor, State of New York

The Honorable Thomas W. Wolf, Governor, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

The Honorable Earl Ray Tomblin, Governor, State of West Virginia