Agricultural Conservation Outcome

Outcome:

Work with producers to apply new conservation practices on 4 million acres of agricultural working lands in high-priority watersheds by 2025 to improve water quality in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

Current Condition:

Of the approximately 8 million acres of agricultural working lands in high-priority watersheds, approximately 4 million acres are identified as having soils with the highest potential for leaching and runoff, which may affect water quality. The 4 million acre target is to apply or expand conservation treatment on virtually all of these most vulnerable agricultural lands.

Background:

Why is it important? This outcome reflects the application of high priority conservation practices that are most closely aligned with reducing potential nutrient and sediment losses from farming activities. Our Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) results are quantifying the biophysical effects of conservation practices and suites of practices. Preliminary data from the Upper Mississippi River Basin suggests that treatment of the most vulnerable acres with high impact conservation practices can reduce substantially the nutrient (N&P) and sediment losses from farming activities.

What is the measure? The measure will track the application of selected conservation practices in indentified priority watersheds. The selected practices will reflect those most closely aligned with reducing potential nutrient and sediment losses from farming activities. The source will be USDA program data from NRCS and FSA.

What is the current condition? In FY2009, conservation practices were applied on about 530,000 acres in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. This includes all practices on all lands in the entire Bay watershed, rather than the subset of priority watersheds. Based on the proportion of the priority watersheds to the Basin at large, we estimate about 50 percent of the acres applied (260,000 acres) would fall within the 2010 priority watershed boundaries.

What is the basis for the target? Of the 7.3 million acres of agricultural working lands in high priority watersheds, 3.6 million acres are identified as having soils with the highest potential for leaching and runoff. The 4 million acres goal would apply or expand conservation treatment on virtually all of the 3.6 million acres. The high priority watersheds are based on Sparrow data vetted through State Technical Committees and soils with the highest potential for leaching and runoff are based off of SSURGO data. We have used this process to approximate the potential size of the area to focus conservation resources; the 4 million acres goal does not imply that these acres are not currently under effective conservation management. This goal further reflects the “targeting” of resources described in the 202b report and 203 strategy, whereby we identify and treat the most strategic acres to improve water quality.