

Ag Progress Days

Testimony by Denise Coleman, State Conservationist, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Good morning Chairpersons Brubaker, O’Pake, Hanna, and Maher and members of the Committees. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to update the House and Senate Committees on Agriculture and Rural Affairs on the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s strategy to restore clean water in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Geological Survey, Department of Transportation, Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Department of Defense, National Park Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) participated in the development of a Strategy for Protecting and Restoring the Chesapeake Bay Watershed— the Federal response to President Obama’s Executive Order on the Bay. The Executive Order Response Strategy was officially released on May 12, 2010. Eight major goals were identified in the Strategy.

NRCS is a leader or co-leader on outcomes related to “Restore Clean Water” and “Development of Environmental Markets”. NRCS will also assist partnering agencies in meeting goals related to recovering fish and wildlife habitat and conserving land. Specifically related to restoring clean water, the Strategy tasks USDA to work with producers to apply new conservation practices on four million acres of agricultural working lands by 2025. While these goals are ambitious, NRCS believes that by focusing resources on priority watersheds, accelerating partnerships, and adequately accounting for conservation practices, these goals can be achieved.

Within the Strategy and slated for fiscal years 2010 and 2011, NRCS is working to expand tracking and reporting systems for conservation practices. While NRCS tracks its own conservation practice implementation, NRCS will be also working with states to capture practices that were implemented without local, State, or Federal cost-share. To date, NRCS has entered into an agreement with the National Association of Conservation Districts, which will take a lead role in coordinating the collection of conservation practice data from public and private sources. The information collected will be used to inform future runs of the EPA Bay Model.

Aside from “Clean Water”, USDA has also been tasked to lead, in coordination with EPA and its other Federal partners, an interdepartmental Environmental Market Team to coordinate efforts in establish an environmental market infrastructure in the Chesapeake Bay. This Team will work to develop and evaluate scientific tools to measure performance of conservation practices; develop protocols that define and measure baselines for supplying credits; measure environmental improvement; develop protocols to certify; and verify that measurable environmental outcomes occur. We recognize Pennsylvania has been a leader in this and will work closely with the State on this.

To achieve the ambitious target to apply conservation practices on over four million acres, NRCS is using both financial and technical assistance. In FY 2010, to date, NRCS has been instrumental in applying

over 549 practices, using Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative (CBWI) funds. Engineering practices installed include, but are not limited to such items as: grass waterways and diversions, stream crossings, and manure storage facilities. However as you know, NRCS's technical assistance is not limited only to on-site engineering assistance. The Agency has also been at the forefront in developing agronomic and nutrient standards.

Currently, NRCS is working with the SERA-17 group to develop a new 590, Nutrient Management Standard. SERA-17 is an organization of resource scientists, policy makers, extension personnel, and educators. At this time, dialogue within the scientific and governmental communities is taking place to determine when phosphorus application will not significantly impact water quality. It is anticipated that the SERA-17 scientists will report to NRCS in September. Once this occurs, NRCS will look to revise the 590 standard and PA-NRCS will look to develop the next generation of a P-index for Pennsylvania.

Related to financial assistance, in FY 2010, NRCS received approximately \$32 million for use in the six states under the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative (CBWI), which was authorized by the 2008 Farm Bill. Of this total, NRCS-PA has obligated over \$9.6 million in CBWI FY 2010 funding. These CBWI funds were directed towards priority watersheds that have been impaired by high loads of nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment. To give you an idea of the extent of cost-share provided, NRCS awarded over \$3.6 million on 78 waste storage structures and \$1.6 million on stabilized barnyards. In addition to these traditional structural practices, NRCS also focused its efforts on a series of agronomic practices. NRCS-PA, in consultation with the State Technical Committee, designated 14 conservation practices as core practices, because they are simple, relatively inexpensive to install and they provide easily documented environmental benefits. These practices include, but are not limited to conservation cover crops, diversions, terraces, grassed waterways, riparian buffers, and terraces. In total, NRCS has dedicated over \$4.4 million to core practices in 2009-2010 in CBWI funding.

In FY 2010, funding was available only in designated priority areas; however in FY 2011, NRCS hopes to make CBWI funding available for all core practices everywhere within the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Our hope is that we will stimulate more application of core practices by the September 30, 2010 cutoff for our first FY 2011 funding cycle. As it did in FY 2010, NRCS will continue to assist Pennsylvania's farmers install core practices and manure storage structures. This CBWI funding, combined with the over \$8.7 million Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding has had an impact on over 50,000 acres per year with the watershed.

NRCS has several programs that can provide financial assistance to help landowners improve both aquatic and upland wildlife habitat. Many times this habitat improvement also provides significant water quality benefits. In FY 2010, NRCS awarded \$330,000 of Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) funds to restore wildlife habitat. These types of activities that have multiple habitat and water quality benefits include restoration of wetlands on marginal crop and pastureland; removal of old and decaying mill dams and stabilizing legacy sediment that has been stored behind them; stabilization of eroding streambanks while at the same time improving habitat for fish; and planting of perennial native grasses on cropland.

Perhaps one of the most exciting projects this year for PA-NRCS is our new bog turtle initiative. In FY 2011, it is expected that an additional 20 landowners will sign on for the Bog Turtle Initiative through the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). Many of these easements which are dedicated to the restoration of bog turtle habitat will be within the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. NRCS, in partnership with the USFWS, has been working throughout FY2010 to initiate landowner interest in the WRP program and these additional applicants are expected to apply. In the future, NRCS will continue to use CBWI, EQIP, WHIP, and WRP programs to provide multiple benefits across Pennsylvania's landscape. It is our hope within the next fifteen years from 2010-2025, NRCS's impact on the landscape will exceed 750,000 acres.