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Tough Love for Clean Water

Dealing with the Chesapeake Bay clean up has been a lot like dealing with a loved one who is an addict. You constantly get your heart broken. She is miserable, in poor health, and out of control. She makes grandiose promises to get clean, only to fail by making the wrong choices. You give her another chance because you love her. But she won't recover until you get tough.

The partners in the effort to clean up the water that flows to the Chesapeake have just come out with another set of pollution-reduction goals. Anyone who loves the Bay – or the Susquehanna – or the Juniata – or any Pennsylvania stream that leads to the Bay – would be justified in greeting this new set of promises with weary cynicism. After all, the effort to clean up the rivers and streams that flow to the Bay is a 25-year long tale of broken promises and missed goals. And instead of recovering, the water pollution has only gotten worse.

But finally, an intervention. President Obama has ordered the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to hold the states accountable for meeting their goals and to develop an enforcement strategy to deal any broken promises. And the Bay partners' have adopted goals that are short-term, concrete and specific.

This is just what the Susquehanna and the Chesapeake need to recover – tough love for clean water.

The first step of this intervention actually took place last fall when the governors of Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia admitted they had a problem. They publicly announced they had failed and the 2010 pollution clean up goals, set in 2000, would not be achieved. So instead of setting another set of unachievable long-term goals, they vowed to come up with two year goals and meet them.

These two year goals were unveiled this week at a meeting of state officials at George Washington's home at Mount Vernon. The new pollution reduction promise would cut nitrogen pollution flowing to the Chesapeake by almost 16 million pounds and phosphorus pollution by more than one million pounds by May 2011 – just two years. And Pennsylvania has

promised to be responsible for more of the clean up than any other state. Almost half of the total reductions in nitrogen pollution and almost a third of the total reductions of phosphorus pollution will come from the Keystone State.

The Commonwealth promises to spend almost \$67.5 million over the two years to clean up the state's rivers and streams that flow to the Chesapeake. The money will be spent on a host of pollution-stopping projects ranging from sewage treatment plant upgrades to better dirt and gravel road maintenance to changing the phosphorus content of chicken feed. This work will first benefit the Susquehanna, the Juniata, the Conodoguinet, the Conestoga, the Lackawanna and all the other streams in the Bay watershed as it helps clean the Bay.

And there is muscle behind the plan, to make sure these promises are kept. President Obama ordered the creation of a Federal Leadership Committee for the Chesapeake Bay. An independent evaluator will deliver reports to the committee on progress in meeting the goals and keeping the promises. Progress reports will be posted on a public website. If promises are broken, EPA will take enforcement action. EPA and the states are currently negotiating how the enforcement strategy will work.

EPA is holding another big hammer. By next year, EPA will write a massive clean water action plan (known officially as a Total Maximum Daily Load) that will put a firm limit on the amount of pollution that rivers and streams can carry to the Chesapeake. Pennsylvania will then be legally bound under the federal Clean Water Act to limit water pollution from all sources – sewage treatment plants, stormwater runoff, and agricultural pollution – to meet the limit. If Pennsylvania breaks its two year promises, stiffer legal limits in the federal clean water action plan will be all the harder on our towns and farmers.

The new federal commitment to hold Pennsylvania accountable for its promises is just the tough love that we need. Now it's up to us to choose clean water and really start down the road to recovery.

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