

Opinion- Crossroads And Choice For The Susquehanna, Chesapeake Bay And All Waters

By Matthew Ehrhart, PA Office Director, Chesapeake Bay Foundation

A century ago many of our waters were dramatically and tragically altered; they have been orange and lifeless ever since. Today, over 5,500 miles of streams remain altered by abandoned mine drainage (AMD), nearly 2,000 of them leading directly to the Susquehanna River and ultimately the Chesapeake Bay.

A century later we are still trying to fix the problem.

Altogether, of the Pennsylvania streams recently surveyed, 19,210 miles are polluted, and we cannot blame 100-year old activities for all of it. We are all to blame. Pollution from our farms, our towns, our manicured lawns, aging stormwater, and sewage pipes is crippling our waters; overwhelming them with silt, fertilizers, excess nutrients, and other pollution that flows from our land into our waters.

We are choking the life from our most precious natural resource and hurting ourselves at the same time. Polluted rivers and streams damage local economies, threaten human health, and harm the quality of life in local communities. We need to fix this problem. Only changes in our activities will save our waters.

The Chesapeake Bay suffers the same fate as polluted streams. To fix the problem, science has established the maximum amount of pollution the Chesapeake Bay can withstand and still be healthy, and how much pollution must be reduced in Pennsylvania to achieve clean water goals.

Officially, it's called a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) and it's required by the Federal Clean Water Act. In essence, it's a pollution budget or diet, which will set strict limits on the amount of pollution entering our streams, the Susquehanna River, and eventually the Bay.

Pennsylvania finds itself at a crossroads, with so many environmental issues to contend with – how do we ensure clean water for all? We start by charting a course and sticking with it until the work is done. This “course” is not used figuratively. The pollution diet requires Pennsylvania and the other Bay states to develop a plan, a Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP) that will provide a detailed course that provides reasonable assurance of success, allows for flexibility in reaching our water quality goals, and equitably distributes the responsibility among all.

A successful WIP will require investments of money, time, and man-hours over the next 15 years. Those investments in clean water will benefit local economies and create jobs.

In September Pennsylvania officials submitted to EPA a draft WIP, but EPA deemed that it had serious deficiencies and Chesapeake Bay Foundation agrees. The plan did not outline the strategy, timeframe, staffing, funding and regulations necessary to ensure that pollution is reduced.

At our crossroads we find two choices. The first is to revise the WIP, commit the resources, time, and manpower to get the job done, and chart our own course for how we clean up our waterways. The second choice is to dig our heels in the sand, and say it can't be done. If this is the choice Pennsylvania makes, then we will all lose.

If Pennsylvania does not provide EPA with an adequate WIP by November 28, then EPA will ratchet down pollution from the sources over which it has jurisdiction—sewage treatment plants, urban and suburban runoff, and the largest agricultural operations.

EPA understands that the actions it can impose will be extremely expensive, with the bill falling disproportionately on urban and suburban communities. Residents in the Wyoming Valley and surrounding regions would likely see an additional increase to their sewer bills, and local taxes for stormwater upgrades.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation encourages Pennsylvania residents to tell state officials and EPA that Pennsylvania has the responsibility to chart our own course for clean water and demand a stronger WIP.

The public comment period for both the TMDL and the state WIP will end November 8, 2010 at 11:59pm. Residents can learn more about the TMDL and WIP process by visiting the [CBF TMDL](#) webpage.

Matthew Ehrhart is the Executive Director for the Pennsylvania office of the [Chesapeake Bay Foundation](#).

Other Links

[PA Plan To Reduce Pollution Going To Chesapeake Bay Does Not Meet EPA Requirements](#)