

WVDA nutrient management services help farmers and others improve Chesapeake Bay water quality

By Andy Yost

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The water quality in the Chesapeake Bay is directly related to precipitation runoff along its shores and within its headwaters.

In the upper Potomac River region, agriculturalists understand how soil nutrient management practices will have an impact on the environment and economy, and the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) has been helping them develop effective, data-driven nutrient management plans (NMPs) at no cost.

Matt Monroe, Assistant Director of WVDA Regulatory and Environmental Affairs Division, says the Department's emphasis on the issue has resulted in quick advancement toward Chesapeake Bay Program targets.

"As part of our 2025 WIPs (Watershed Implementation Plan) we have a goal of completing and maintaining plans on 90,000 acres in our Bay watershed counties. As of last year we have over 63,000 acres already under planning, even though the WIP goals were set in 2009," Monroe said.

The work has been done largely by six WVDA staff members.

“The department writes over 90 percent of the plans in the state, and the majority of those are in the five poultry-producing counties with others in the tip of the eastern panhandle,” said WVDA Poultry and Environmental Specialist Jerry Ours, who oversees five Nutrient Management Specialists who write plans that advise farmers on fertilizer, lime and manure needs for their fields, based on soil and nutrient testing. The plans also prescribe Best Management Practices (BMPs) to be implemented on the farm that protect streams from runoff and save farmers on fertilizer expenses.

“It gives farmers an idea about how their present farming practices can affect land and water resources in the future,” said Ashley Kisamore.

Her co-worker Jeremy Crossland agrees. “Nutrient management plans give the farmer a better understanding of what their soil already has in it and makes the farm more productive and more efficient in the future,” he added.

Mark Hedrick, a part-time farmer, said that all of his co-workers have involvement in farming, especially with family partnerships. They also agree on their favorite aspect of their job - getting out of the office, into the field (quite literally sometimes!) and working with producers.

Says Kisamore, “I like getting to meet more of the farmers in the area.... I’m getting to know the community I’m in so much better.”

“People are becoming more concerned, more aware, and more interested in this program,” said Natasha Keplinger, who also partners with her husband on a cow-calf farm operation.

Crossland noted that younger producers and more knowledgeable producers are more likely to get involved.

Participants don't have to be full-time, commercial or poultry farmers. Plans have been written for golf courses, orchards and tree farms. Tracts of timber are referred to the West Virginia Division of Forestry for timber management plans.

The number of plans a specialist can write in a year varies, but most of the specialists write about 40 annually. The number is affected by the complexity of the plan, size of the operation and what programs the producer is involved in.

"CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) take more time because of the additional components they require," Kisamore said.

"A producer needs a plan in order to participate in cover crop programs, lime application programs, CREP (Conservation Reserve Enhanced Programs), stream fencing, and tree plantings," Hedrick said.

Some of these programs are state, some are local conservation district measures and some are federal. With a myriad of options, practices, funding sources, verifications, and acronyms farmers are grateful for the aid this program and the specialists who work in it provide. All the specialists feel nutrient management planning is well received and continuing to grow, connecting better farming methods with the larger environmental community of the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Hedrick sums up the efforts well: “By working to hold sediments, we hold more nutrients on the farm and out of the Bay, resulting in a healthier watershed. Keeping nutrients on the farm and out of the water is a benefit to all.”

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