

Executive Summary

Saving the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Requires Better Coordination of Environmental and Agricultural Resources

EPA OIG Report No. 2007-P-00004
USDA OIG Report No. 50601-10-Hq

November 20, 2006

Purpose of Review

We conducted this review at the request of U.S. Senator Barbara A. Mikulski of Maryland. Our overall objective was to identify principal barriers to achieving nutrient reduction goals in the Chesapeake Bay. This report, the first of several planned, is on agriculture issues. It was prepared through a partnership between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Offices of Inspector General. The report concentrated on agricultural best management practices used to address nonpoint nutrient and sediment loading to the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

What We Found

Despite significant efforts to improve water quality in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, excess nutrients and sediment continue to impair the Bay's water quality. Improving water quality conditions in the Bay is necessary to support living resources throughout the ecosystem, which in turn supports commercial and recreational uses, such as fishing/shellfishing. At the current rate of progress, the watershed will remain impaired for decades. State-level partners have committed the agricultural community to making the largest nutrient reductions, but numerous practices abound and are generally performed on a voluntary basis. Few of the agricultural practices in the tributary strategies have been implemented because the agricultural community considers many of these practices as either being unprofitable or requiring significant changes in farming techniques. Although the State-level partners have provided substantial funding to implement these practices, one of the key State partners acknowledged substantial additional funding is still needed. At the Federal level, applications for USDA's technical and financial assistance programs went unfunded, making it difficult to expand incentives for Bay area agricultural producers.

EPA must improve its coordination and collaboration with its Bay partners and the agricultural community to better reduce nutrients and sediment entering the Chesapeake Bay watershed. However, members of the agricultural community have been reluctant to participate with EPA because of EPA's regulatory enforcement role. USDA, a Bay partner at the Federal level, could significantly assist EPA in implementing the needed conservation practices within the agricultural community. Given its many conservation programs, extensive field organization, and long experience working with the agricultural community, USDA's commitment and collaboration would significantly contribute to the EPA Chesapeake Bay Program Office's plan for long-term improvement to the Bay's water quality. However, USDA has not coordinated a Department-wide strategy or policy to address its commitment as a Bay partner.

What We Recommend

We recommend that EPA execute a new Memorandum of Agreement with USDA that specifically identifies tasks and timeframes for meeting mutually shared goals in the cleanup of the Bay. Further, the two agencies should agree to a method to track progress. Also, EPA, USDA, and the States, with assistance from land grant universities and agricultural organizations, should revisit State tributary strategies to ensure that an effective and cost-efficient combination of conservation practices are adopted and implemented. USDA should assign a senior level official to coordinate with EPA's Chesapeake Bay Program and review the feasibility of targeting USDA funds geographically. Although these steps will not by themselves solve the Bay's problems, they will significantly assist the Bay partners in cleaning up the Bay. EPA and USDA generally concurred with our findings and recommendations.

For further information, contact:

- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Inspector General at (202) 566-2391; or
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of Inspector General, at FOIASTAFF@oig.usda.gov

To review the full report online, click on:

- www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2007/20061120-2007-P-00004.pdf; or
- www.usda.gov/oig/rptsaudits.htm