

West Virginia Department of Agriculture

Walt Helmick, Commissioner



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COOPERATIVE FARM CONSERVATION EFFORTS ENHANCING WATER QUALITY

Charleston, W.Va. – Water quality is improving considerably in West Virginia’s tributaries to the Chesapeake Bay, according to a progress report released Friday by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).

The report, entitled “Agricultural Lands - Key to a Healthy Chesapeake Bay,” looks specifically at the effect that agricultural conservation practices have had on local streams, as well as the Chesapeake Bay as a whole.

The release was celebrated by U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and representatives from state agencies, agricultural groups and non-government organizations in Anne Arundel County, Md., Friday, September 9.

Ninety-nine percent of the watershed's cultivated acres have at least one conservation measure in place, a figure Secretary Vilsack called "an extraordinary achievement unmatched anywhere in the United States."

"Sure, there's more work to be done, no question, but we have come a long way and we're beginning to see positive results," Secretary Vilsack added.

“Thanks to the collective work and dedication of farmers, government agencies and private partners, we are seeing improvements to water quality that many people thought impossible through a voluntary program,” said West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick. “West Virginia is well on its way to meeting long-term nutrient and sediment reduction goals that will protect our state’s most important natural resource for our future – its abundant clean water.”

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The NRCS report says that since 2009, conservation measures have been installed on more than 229,000 acres in West Virginia alone. In fiscal year 2015, more than 66,000 agricultural acres in West Virginia were being operated under nutrient management plans (NMP) prepared by five full-time West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) staff members, along with staff members of NRCS, the West Virginia Conservation Agency (WVCA), WVU Extension and other certified plan writers. Total investment in West Virginia since 2009 is nearly \$53 million, according to NRCS.

NMPs are tailored to individual farms to provide operators with conservation measures that fit their operation. Often referred to as best management practices (BMPs), the measures often include nutrient application rates, stream buffer zones, prescribed grazing, waste storage facilities and cover crops.

In the Chesapeake Bay watershed as a whole - which includes parts of six states and the District of Columbia - farmers have implemented nearly \$900 million worth of conservation practices on 3.6 million acres. That's an area three times the size of Delaware. Farmers have matched that money with \$400 million worth of their own investment.

From this work, based on 2006-2011 data, average edge-of-field sediment loss has decreased by 15.1 million tons per year, which is enough soil to fill 150,000 train cars, stretching 1,704 miles or a distance further than from Washington D.C. to Albuquerque, New Mexico.

And the nutrient reduction being made upstream are having a positive effect on the health of the Chesapeake Bay. Underwater grasses that provide critical habitat expanded from 60,000 to 91,000 acres between 2013 and 2015. Adult female blue crab population is up 92 percent compared to last year. And the overall crab population is the fourth highest measured in the past two decades.

USDA pointed out that the conservation efforts are nothing new. It and its state and private partners have worked with farmers in the Bay region for more than 80 years.

Commissioner Helmick noted that numerous agencies have contributed to the recent success of conservation efforts in West Virginia. Among them: USDA-NRCS, USDA-Farm Service Agency, West Virginia Department of Agriculture, West Virginia Conservation Agency, Conservation District Supervisors, West Virginia Division of Environmental Protection, West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Trout Unlimited, West Virginia Division of Forestry, and, of course, the state's farming community.

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