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Save the Farm, Save the Bay

Where can you find the most cost-effective path to cleaner water in the Bay?  
Down on the farm, of course.

By Robert Whitescarver, Bay Journal News Service

The five-year court battle is over. The Supreme Court of the United States, by declining to hear the case, has affirmed two lower courts' decisions that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency did not overstep its bounds by setting total maximum daily loads (TMDL), or a "pollution diet," for jurisdictions in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

That is now settled law, part of the federal Clean Water Act, and we can finally focus our resources on what will make the most difference to the health of the Bay: improving soil health on farmland and cleaning up our streams. It is now time for environmentalists, farmers, bureaucrats, politicians and watermen in the Chesapeake Bay watershed to embrace this fact: A well-managed farmland is the most important land use and our greatest hope for a restored Bay.

The first order of business is to keep farmers on the farm. The second order of business is to help farmers apply the necessary soil and water conservation measures on their land so that soil and nutrients stay on their land, out of their local streams and out of the Bay. Not counting forested land, farmland has, by far, the largest footprint in the Bay's 64,000-square-mile watershed — and, happily, it is the most economical and practical land to treat for clean water. For sure there are many other sources of Bay pollution, and there are ongoing fixes, but farmland has the most potential to do the most good.

The following scenario is true and is typical of what happens somewhere, every day, in this sprawling watershed. A 200-acre farm in the Shenandoah Valley is rezoned from agriculture to high-density residential. Developers bulldoze the green pastures, put up 400 houses and people move in — a thousand of them. This requires a new elementary school and a sewage treatment plant upgrade that together cost the taxpayers in the county more than \$30 million dollars. It also takes away another piece of what makes the Shenandoah Valley so beautiful: farmland.

I wish we would instead give the farmer a million dollars to not develop. We could save 29 million in public funds every time it happens.

Protecting farmland from development is the best way to avoid the cost of future development. The more farmland within the watershed, the easier it will be to put locally grown, healthy food on the table and restore the bay. Farmland not only produces food, fiber, feed and fuel, it can also produce clean water, if done right.

When it rains on farmland where good soil and water conservation measures are in place, the rain soaks into the soil, percolates through it and emerges as clean water in our streams. The soil is in fact the regulator of the water cycle. Not so with concrete, pavement, and rooftops from urban areas. The resulting runoff from these areas is not clean water — and it is in fact the most expensive and difficult to water to treat.

So our greatest hope, and the best value for our money, is to help farmers stay on the farm and continue their work to improve soil health on their farms. Agriculture is halfway to reducing its share of nutrients fouling local streams and eventually reaching the bay. That's why the Virginia General Assembly recently passed a budget with an estimated \$30 million for land conservation and \$61.7 million for agricultural best management practices. To varying degrees, other bay states are investing in farmland preservation and improvements as well.

Land conservation involves a mixture of incentives and disincentives to keep farms in place and operational, instead of selling the land for non-farm uses. Outright purchase of development rights is one way to do it, and there are various federal, state and local tax incentives to help farms stay in agricultural production.

Beyond that, we need to greatly expand financial aid and incentives for agricultural best management practices that minimize farm runoff and pollution. These include rotational grazing, using cover crops to cover the soil during the winter, planting on the contour, rotating crops, keeping livestock out of streams and carefully managing nutrients. The cost of government support of these practices pales in comparison to the expense of upgrading a wastewater treatment plant or reducing urban and suburban polluted runoff.

Where do farmers need help? Overgrazed pastures, eroding cropland, manure-laden feedlots with streams flowing past or through them, livestock lounging in streams, and too many nutrients applied to fields — those are the main causes of agricultural pollution. There are well-known fixes for these poor practices and funds to help get the job done.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled: The Chesapeake Clean Water Blueprint is our path forward. The Blueprint is online. Every state, every county and every city knows what they have to do to do their part for a restored bay. Let's work

together to show the world that we really can restore the Chesapeake Bay.

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