

**Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts, Inc.**

**Testimony to Joint Hearing  
Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee and  
Senate Environmental Resources and Energy Committee**

**Chesapeake Bay Tributary Strategy**

**September 20, 2005**

My name is Susan Fox Marquart and I am the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts Inc. (PACD). The PACD thanks the members of the Senate for asking us to provide information on this important subject.

**History of Conservation District Involvement**

As many of you may be aware, Pennsylvania's conservation districts have a long history with the Chesapeake Bay Program. When the Bay program began in 1983, conservation districts already had a history of working with landowners and farmers to reduce runoff and control erosion and sedimentation. The Pennsylvania Chesapeake Bay Program was originally created as an agricultural nonpoint source pollution abatement program. From the state perspective, conservation districts were the logical entity to implement the Program locally since they were able to reach farmers and landowners with delivery mechanisms that already existed in every county.

Conservation districts and their local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) partners have worked with the state for over 20 years to implement this national program in each county in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Pennsylvania conservation districts have delivered the Bay Program locally through four different assistance programs; Planning Assistance, Educational Assistance, Technical Assistance and Financial Assistance. Funding for these programs comes from a federal implementation grant from EPA and is matched by state dollars. Conservation districts have used these assistance programs to work with farmers to develop conservation plans and install best management practices (BMPs) on the ground in Pennsylvania to reduce nutrients and sedimentation flowing into the Chesapeake Bay.

**Development of the Strategy**

The PACD believes that the Chesapeake Bay Program was developed and implemented over the years using a bottom-up approach. The program was delivered locally through the conservation districts who worked one-on-one with farmers to prepare individual conservation plans and help farmers implement the plans using the Financial Assistance Program and other funds.

Conversely, the PACD believes that the new Chesapeake Bay Tributary Strategy has been developed utilizing a top-down approach. The Strategy was developed by the 13 watershed teams in the DEP regional offices. The DEP teams utilized the Bay Program model to calculate nutrient and sediment loads to streams and identify BMPs that would reduce these nonpoint source pollutants going into streams. After DEP central office approved the Strategy, it was released to the public. Although conservation districts have implemented the state's program for 20 years, they were not asked to participate in the process of developing a new Strategy. They were invited after the fact to respond to the Strategy when it was released to the public.

Conservation districts' concerns with the Strategy include:

- the cost of implementing all the BMPs in the strategy is high;
- funding for financial assistance for farmers to install BMPs to implement conservation plans is declining;
- the current tracking systems used to account for practices that are implemented is inadequate;
- the number of acres proposed for no-till is impractical given issues in Pennsylvania such as small farm size, terrain, and difficulties incorporating manure into no-tilled ground;
- the number of acres proposed for implemented conservation plans is unrealistic given the backlog in planning due to high demand and a relatively small number of qualified planners;
- new "precision" BMPs do not have USDA NRCS technical guidance and standards; and
- it is unrealistic to propose over 400,000 acres in the "yield reserve" BMP that is currently only a pilot project with a handful of participating farmers.

These and other concerns may have been resolved had the conservation districts and other partners been consulted prior to releasing the Strategy.

### **County Implementation Plans and Financial Assistance**

As part of the new strategy, conservation districts were informed by DEP that there would be a change to the way funds are allocated under the Financial Assistance Program. Conservation districts were asked to voluntarily develop a county plan on how they would implement the Chesapeake Bay Tributary Strategy in their county.

An explanation of the process can be found on page 38 of Pennsylvania's Chesapeake Bay Tributary Strategy and states:

To better direct limited funds and resources to maximize water quality benefits, DEP is proposing to change the process for allocating funds to conservation districts under the Chesapeake Bay Program. County conservation districts have been asked to work with DEP regional office staff and other local partners to develop County Implementation Plans that emphasize water quality results. As part of these County Plans, the districts may propose alternative priorities, action

plans and outputs that they believe are consistent with the Tributary Strategy and may be more effective in meeting the new Bay Program objectives. The regions will be making the recommendations on the distribution of Bay BMP funds based on their assessment of the quality of county plans and watershed priorities.

Using the County Implementation Plans as a basis for allocations is not consistent with the current Statement of Policy for the Financial Assistance Program. Conservation districts feel DEP did not include them in the process of changing the allocation method and did not provide sufficient guidance on what was expected in the county implementation plans. If this new procedure is to be used in the future, PACD asks that DEP go through the formal process of revising the Financial Assistance Program's Statement of Policy so that conservation districts have a clear understanding of the allocation method.

As a result of this change in policy, many conservation districts invested significant time and resources to develop a county implementation plan that they felt would both meet the needs of their particular county and implement the Chesapeake Bay Tributary Strategy. In the end, only \$879,500 was available this fiscal year under the Financial Assistance Program to allocate among the 38 counties implementing the program. This was not enough funding to implement the first year of the county plans.

Overall, funding for the Financial Assistance Program has decreased over the past six years from about \$1.5 million in 2000 to \$879,500 this year. Given that the total estimated cost to implement the agricultural BMPs in the Tributary Strategy is \$592 million, the amount of financial assistance available for farmers under the Financial Assistance Program is obviously not sufficient to meet the goals of the program. More funding is needed for farmers to implement the BMPs.

The Tributary Strategy suggests that funding can be obtained from other state and federal programs to help implement the strategy. While there may be some financial resources available from other federal and state programs, a large funding shift would have to take place to accomplish this. The PACD believes that shifting funds from statewide programs, such as Growing Greener, to target the Chesapeake Bay Program could severely impact counties located outside of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and leave them unable to address their local environmental concerns.

### **Technical Assistance**

Another very important aspect of the Bay Program has been the Technical Assistance Program. This Program currently provides funding for 49 technician, engineer and engineering assistant positions in conservation districts. These individuals work one-on-one with farmers to educate and assist them to implement BMPs contained in their conservation plans. Conservation districts feel that funding for technical assistance is one of the most important elements of the existing program since this work directly impacts the conservation practices installed on the land. In addition, technicians have the ability to leverage funds from other programs to help fund the installation of BMPs. Funding for

the Technical Assistance Program has remained fairly consistent over the past six years. However, due to rising employment costs, the number of technical positions available to assist farmers has decreased.

Conservation districts indicate that the new Chesapeake Bay Tributary Strategy will likely require more one-on-one technician time to work with farmers educating them on no-till and other newly targeted BMPs. Conservation district technicians will also need additional training so they can continue to work effectively with farmers and market the new BMP practices.

DEP has also informed the conservation districts that funding for engineers and engineering assistants will be eliminated. PACD opposes the elimination of funding for engineers and engineering technicians in the Bay Program. Although the Chesapeake Bay Tributary Strategy targets many new non-structural practices, such as conservation tillage and no-till, engineering is still necessary to design structural BMPs that are included in farm conservation and nutrient management plans. Without engineering assistance made available through conservation district offices, farmers will have to pay for private consultants or seek assistance from federal agencies whose resources are already overtaxed.

### **Summary**

In summary, conservation districts have helped the Bay Program evolve into a national model. Conservation districts have shown that, given adequate resources, programs delivered at the local level are the most cost-efficient and effective means of engaging citizens who are interested in implementing conservation practices.

Conservation districts are not opposed to change. They want to be actively involved in all phases of program development, including program evaluation. We value our conservation partners, such as DEP, and want to work with them well into the future.