

MARYLAND'S TRIBUTARY TEAMS: AN INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIP TO REDUCE NUTRIENT POLLUTION IN CHESAPEAKE BAY

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The Problem

Much has been written about the problems of the Chesapeake Bay, and the successes achieved to-date in controlling excess nutrients and restoring habitat. One key to the progress in restoring this estuary has been the establishment of specific numeric goals, and the commitment of political leaders to meet those goals. The most well-known goal has been the pledge by Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Washington D.C. to reduce nitrogen and phosphorus loads by 40% by the year 2000 (using 1985 as a base year). Now, with the year 2000 rapidly approaching, the Bay States will be held accountable. Will these ambitious goals be met? If so, how?

Maryland's Approach

Maryland has had aggressive programs to control nutrients from wastewater treatment plants and agricultural lands for many years. While much progress has been made, the state still has considerable work to do to achieve its 40% nutrient reduction goals. To achieve the maximum amount possible during a period of constrained budgets and concern about excess government regulation, Maryland has recently focused on creating a new working relationship between the federal, state and local governments, business, the agricultural community and citizens to improve water quality, and enhance habitat for living resources. Just as the Chesapeake Bay Agreement is a model for interjurisdictional cooperation, the state recognized a need to extend this partnership to those responsible for making local land use decisions.

Progress to-date

With input from local governments and stakeholders, the state created "Tributary Strategies," watershed-based plans to reduce nutrient pollution from point and nonpoint sources in each of the state's ten major Chesapeake Bay basins. To help Maryland implement those strategies, "Tributary Teams" were formed in each of the ten tributaries in August 1995. These teams are made up of representatives of state and local agencies, farmers, businesses, environmental organizations, federal facilities, and citizens. They meet monthly, providing local knowledge essential for implementing best management practices, and helping state and local governments target their programs to improve efficiency and participation.

The Teams' mission is to:

- Ensure that implementation of nutrient reduction practices proceeds on schedule in a

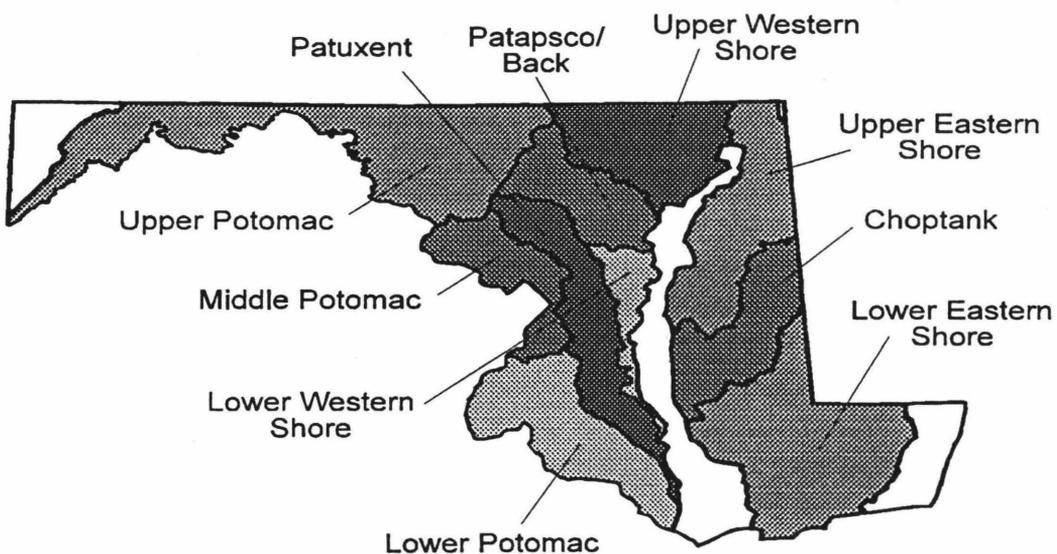
- fair and flexible manner;
- Coordinate participation among citizens, government agencies, and other interested parties; and
- Promote an understanding of Tributary Strategy goals and the actions needed to achieve them through public education.

In practice, the Teams have developed three distinct roles: policy/advisory, implementation, and outreach/education.

Policy/Advisory - Each of the ten teams produced their first annual report in Fall 1996. These contained findings and recommendations on existing nutrient reduction efforts. The teams commented on the effectiveness of current programs, noting barriers to implementation, and suggesting alternative approaches. On the Eastern Shore of Maryland, representatives of the three teams have joined a task force to advise the state on developing a cover crop program. Cover crops are small grains planted in the Fall on land otherwise fallow with no fertilizer applied. This practice reduces nitrate leaching losses during the winter. The task force has identified problems with the existing state program, and is recommending more flexible planting dates and added financial incentives to increase farmer participation.

Implementation - Taking the step from noting a problem to becoming involved in the solution has not been easy for all the Teams. In 1997, the state allocated part of its federal Clean Water Act funds for Tributary Team projects. Each team will have one or more projects that will allow them to focus on a local priority and see concrete results. For example, one Eastern Shore Team is funding a pilot projects to test the applicability of aerial seeding of cover crops. The Upper Potomac Team is funding a rotational grazing project to reduce erosion and nutrient losses from pasture. Several Teams have also co-

Maryland's Ten Bay Tributary Basins



sponsored workshops with the University of Maryland, focusing on financing and other implementation barriers to the adoption of best management practices. Workshops to date have focused on addressing barriers to riparian forest buffers on agricultural land and dedicated funding for stormwater management and maintenance in urban areas.

Education/Outreach. Many of the teams have focused on this activity, taking different approaches. The Upper Eastern Shore reached thousands of citizens with a conservation message at the Annual Chesapeake Bay Bridge Walk. Other teams have targeted home and garden shows to educate homeowners about “bay-friendly” lawn care techniques.

Challenges Ahead

The presentation will provide examples of Team activities from their first two years of work, and analyze their effectiveness as a force for change within Maryland and the Bay watershed. Adopting a watershed approach to nutrient reduction statewide is a complex endeavor; even more so when all of the key stakeholders are involved in decision making. The following challenges are among those that have emerged to date, and must be gradually resolved as the process continues.

- What should the role of State agencies be in the process?
- What is the Teams’ role in implementation? How will it evolve?
- How can private sector involvement in the Teams be further developed?
- How can leadership skills within the Teams be further developed?
- How can the need for additional funds for conservation practices be addressed?
- How will future population growth and land use change be addressed?
- How can local government support for nutrient reduction efforts be maintained and strengthened?
- How can differences between statewide nutrient reduction goals based on Chesapeake Bay and local water quality goals based on local streams be reconciled?
- How can the Teams help build a watershed perspective that will be the basis for local government planning decisions?

Conclusion

Maryland’s Tributary Teams have been meeting for less than two years, and are still in the beginning stages of their work. They are a key part of an approach that has never been tried before in Maryland-- a long term watershed-based implementation effort that seeks to accomplish both Chesapeake Bay Program nutrient reduction goals and local water quality objectives. It is not yet clear where the balance between a state-directed and a locally-driven approach will be struck. What is clear is that the Tributary Teams offer an opportunity to rethink traditional approaches toward improving water quality, and could greatly expand the constituency for watershed protection.