

Turning the Tide, Saving the Chesapeake Bay

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation's biweekly, Tuesday morning podcast

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Title: Episode 2, *Agriculture and the Bay*

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Summary: There are 87,000 farms in the Bay region. Agriculture contributes richly to our economy, our culture, and our society. But, considering the size and scope of all Bay agriculture, we've got concerns. Farming is the largest source of pollution to our Bay and its rivers and streams. So, what are we doing to save the Bay and benefit agriculture simultaneously?

Hi, I'm Will Baker. Two weeks ago, I launched our new podcast series—*Turning the Tide, Saving the Chesapeake Bay*. I promised a new installment every other Tuesday. Thousands of you listened to the first one and many commented.

Today, I want to discuss [agriculture in the region](#).

Farming represents a critical part of the economic and cultural fabric of the Chesapeake Bay. More land is in agriculture than anything else except forestry. There are 87,000 farms in Bay Country, and they contribute 13 percent of the region's gross domestic product and \$10 billion worth of food and fiber annually. **Bottom line: farmers feed us and contribute to our society in countless ways.**

But we have concerns. Consider simply the size and scope of all Bay agriculture, and it is little surprise that farming is the largest source of pollution to the Bay and its rivers and streams. On average, 40 to 60 percent of the region's [nitrogen, phosphorus](#), and sediment pollution comes from agriculture. That is fact. Unfortunately, some distort that fact and say or imply that farmers are the biggest polluters. On an acre for acre basis, this is simply not true. The Bay would much rather have an acre of farm land than [an acre of parking lot](#) at a suburban strip mall.

So CBF is pro-farming. We operate [our own working farm](#) in southern Maryland. And we know better than many of our environmental colleagues just what farmers are up against in order to make a living. We also know that there are cost-effective practices that can be employed to reduce agricultural pollution and often benefit production. **So clearly, farmers just like all of us, should be held accountable to not pollute someone's water downstream.**

It is a matter of fairness. Fairness also dictates though, that farmers, like all of the rest of us, have cost share funds and technical assistance made available. To that end, [CBF is doing its part](#). For decades, we have lobbied successfully for state and federal assistance, and we have staff and volunteers spread throughout the region working shoulder-to-shoulder with farmers to help them target and implement [proven conservation practices](#). These include fencing cattle out

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of streams, planting trees and bushes along stream banks to reduce erosion, and plowing cropland in ways that minimize soil disturbance and improve soil quality.

The good news is that a 2013 USDA report indicates that a vast majority—some 90 percent—of farms in the region have at least one of those conservation practices in place. That same report though, says that one conservation practice is rarely enough. **Much more needs to be done to meet the overall target reductions set by the states.** These reductions are central to the regional [Clean Water Blueprint](#), a Bay restoration plan with deadlines of 2017 and 2025. Because agriculture is such a dominant land use, states have targeted some 75% of the total remaining pollution reduction to come from agriculture. This follows past advances which came primarily from [sewage treatment plant upgrades](#).

Fortunately, these practices are, by far, the least expensive way to stop a pound of nitrogen, phosphorus, or sediment from getting into the Bay or any of its rivers and streams. And there is more good news. Millions of federal and state cost share dollars are currently available to help Bay farmers get the job done, thanks to CBF, farm organizations, and other conservation partners who have all worked together to make the case.

So, what's the hang up? The largest source of pollution, the cheapest to clean up, and lots of help available. Well here's the hang up: whereas most other pollution sectors—including sewage treatment facilities, urban and suburban [polluted runoff](#), and airborne sources—are federally regulated under the [Clean Water Act](#), most of agriculture is exempt. It is up to the states to establish and enforce restoration requirements. They have set targets supported by the best science, but they have not done enough to ensure compliance.

So what happens if nothing changes? You and I and other tax payers will have to pay for far more expensive treatment methods, like ratcheting down even further on sewage treatment.

We know that the Bay can be saved if everyone does their part. If not, we have seen a very different version of the future. And it is not pretty. We see it in developed cities in Central Africa, where one of my staff visited recently. The strict warning she got was this: Do not drink the water. Do not brush your teeth with tap water. Use only bottled water. She even told me about running a bath only to find brown water coming out of the tap. And we only need to look as far away as Toledo, Ohio, where just last summer, residents in were warned to have [no contact—zero contact—with their tap water](#), much less drink it, all due to a pollution incident caused by polluted agricultural runoff into Lake Erie. This was Toledo, Ohio! An American City! In 2014! **We can and we must do better and why not start right here in Chesapeake Bay country, birth place of our nation.**

At CBF, we are working to accelerate agricultural pollution reduction. Our strategy is to encourage the states to do more—to partner with farmers, helping them to work smarter and apply cutting edge technologies to improve water quality. But the states must set firm targets, and enforce them.

Finally, I want to remind you that it is not just the environment that is at stake. When fully implemented, the Chesapeake Clean Water Blueprint can be expected to provide an annual

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increase of more than \$22 billion in [ecosystem service benefits](#) throughout the region. Now there's a win-win.

Thanks for listening. I'll be back in two weeks, talking about how a number of powerful interests are suing to stop the Chesapeake Clean Water Blueprint in federal court. It is an unbelievable story, but it's true.

Thank you. I'm Will Baker, President of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.