The Moment in Time: The Case for the Clean Water Blueprint for the Chesapeake

The Chesapeake Bay and its hundreds of tributary rivers and streams are a national treasure. They're an extraordinary economic engine, a recreational resource for the 17 million who live in its watershed and the millions more who visit the region, and home to thousands of species, including crabs, oysters, rockfish, freshwater fish, and resident and migrating birds. Saving the Bay will pay great benefits to us, our children, and future generations.

For too long, all of us have abused our natural resources by treating them as part of our waste-disposal system. Agricultural, urban, and suburban runoff; inadequately treated sewage, industrial waste, and septic effluent; and many other types of pollution are traditionally directed right to our waterways. The resulting reduction in water quality threatens our social, recreational, and spiritual well-being, costs jobs and weakens our economy, destroys critical habitat on which wildlife depends; and even puts our health at risk.

The Chesapeake Clean Water Blueprint is Established

Efforts to restore the health of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries have been underway since the 1960s. And progress has been made. Until recently, however, there has not been a comprehensive approach that takes into consideration the entire six-state, 64,000-square-mile watershed, and as a result the Bay remains on the federal "Impaired Waters" list.

Following 15 years of failed voluntary actions, in 2009, CBF sued the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for failure to enforce the Clean Water Act. After 18 months of intense negotiation, we settled the case with a binding agreement obligating EPA to take immediate action.

In compliance with the settlement, EPA exercised its authority in December 2010 by designating limits to reduce nitrogen, phosphorous, and sediment pollution for the entire Chesapeake system. Each of the six states and the District of Columbia, which constitute the Chesapeake's watershed, has submitted and begun to implement plans to meet the required reductions.

Together, these efforts create an achievable Clean Water Blueprint for the Chesapeake, different from any of the failed efforts that preceded it. The Blueprint:

- Ensures everyone is responsible;
- Sets two-year incremental milestones for pollution reduction to keep clean-up efforts on-track; and
- Imposes consequences for failure, ensuring states and local communities will not shirk their responsibilities.

Powerful Forces Trying to Kill the Blueprint

Just 11 days after the Blueprint was ratified, the American Farm Bureau Federation sued in federal court to derail it. Soon after, the National Association of Home Builders, the Fertilizer Institute, the National Chicken Council, the National Corn Growers Association, the National Pork Producers Council, the National Turkey Federation, and the U.S. Poultry & Egg Association joined the suit. These organizations are also working with their Congressional allies to kill it legislatively. The tragedy of national special interests groups, motivated by financial concerns, trying to stop the culmination of three decades of work to save the Bay in our backyards is not lost on a bi-partisan group of elected officials who support the Blueprint.

Further good news is the fact that a coalition of several hundred conservation groups and several municipal authorities are working together to defend the state/federal Clean Water Blueprint. We will not be defeated.

Clean Water is Good for the Economy

The Chesapeake Bay has been valued at over one trillion dollars, with the Chesapeake's fisheries industries being a significant part of the region's economy. Commercial seafood in Maryland and Virginia contributed $2 billion in sales, $1 billion in income, and more than 41,000 jobs to the local economy in 2008 (NOAA). The economic benefits of saltwater recreational fishing are equally impressive, contributing $1.6 billion in sales that in turn contributed more than $800 million of additional economic activity and roughly 13,000 jobs (NOAA).

Additionally, recreational boating is a strong economic driver. The total impact on the Maryland economy from recreational boating is estimated to be about $2.03 billion and 35,025 jobs. In Pennsylvania, residents spend $1.7 billion on boating annually. A recent study in Hampton, Virginia, found that "water quality, fishing quality, and other environmental factors" ranked among the most important influences on a boater's decision of where to keep his or her boat.

Nature-based recreation such as wildlife watching and ecotourism, which are dependent on clean water, are also vital economic drivers for the Bay region. Roughly eight million wildlife watchers spent $636 million, $960 million, and $1.4 billion in Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, respectively, in 2006.

Pollution Hurts the Economy

In Pennsylvania, the state Fish and Boat Commission estimates nearly two million people go fishing in the Commonwealth each year, contributing more than $1.6 billion to the economy. Recently, the Fish and Boat Commission mandated catch-and-release of smallmouth bass in certain areas of the Susquehanna River because of population declines associated with water-quality problems. This change will affect Pennsylvania's nearly two million anglers who contribute $1.6 billion to the state's economy annually. And in Virginia's Shenandoah River, a fish kill in 2005, caused in part by poor water quality, resulted in roughly a $700,000 loss in retail sales and revenues.

Investment in Clean-Water Technologies Creates Jobs and Stimulates Local Economies

A recent University of Virginia study found that implementation of agricultural practices, such as livestock stream exclusion, buffers, and cover crops, would generate significant economic impacts. Every $1 of state and/or federal funding invested in agricultural best management practices would generate $1.56 in economic activity in Virginia. Implementing agricultural practices in Virginia to the levels necessary to restore the Bay would create nearly 12,000 jobs.

Investment in water and sewer infrastructure typically yields greater returns than most other types of public infrastructure. For example, $1 of water and sewer infrastructure investment increases private output (Gross Domestic Product) in the long-term by $6.35 (The U.S. Conference of Mayors). Furthermore, adding a job in water and sewer infrastructure creates 3.68 additional jobs to support that one. Philadelphia estimates that their green infrastructure plan will create more than $2 in benefits for every $1 invested, generating $500 million in economic benefits, $1.3 billion in social benefits, and $400 million in environmental benefits.

Upgrading water and sewer infrastructure and improving stormwater management across the watershed—key elements of the Clean Water Blueprint—is projected to create nearly 240,000 engineering and construction jobs in this region alone.

We Can Save the Bay

One need only look to Gunston Cove on the Potomac River to see the beneficial results of pollution reduction. Fairfax County, Virginia has been proactive in decreasing pollution since the late 1970s. In a response to the ban on phosphate in laundry detergents and sewage treatment plant upgrades, Fairfax dramatically reduced phosphorus pollution. In the last several years, additional sewage treatment plant upgrades have reduced nitrogen pollution—all in spite of the increasing population and volume of wastewater. As a result, Gunston Cove has seen improved water clarity, declines in algal blooms, and a doubling of underwater grasses.

If the Clean Water Blueprint is fully implemented, Gunston Cove will be a harbinger of the entire Chesapeake system of open estuary and tributary rivers and streams. To date, 50 percent of the original 1985 pollution reduction targets, which have been incorporated into the Blueprint, have been achieved. Gradual reductions in the size of the low-oxygen dead zones are being documented, and crabs, oysters, underwater grasses, and a number of bird species are all doing better. There is a long way to go, but the Blueprint provides the scientifically designed roadmap, the regulatory authority, and bi-partisan support. It must be defended.

The Chesapeake Bay and its rivers are streams are getting better. Let's finish the job!

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Saving a National Treasure

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