

Turning the Tide, Saving the Chesapeake Bay

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation's biweekly, Tuesday morning podcast

URL: <http://chesbay.podbean.com>

Title: Episode 3, *As Goes the Susquehanna, So Goes the Chesapeake Bay*

Aired: April 28, 2015

Summary: Upgrades to sewage treatment plants have helped improve water quality in the Chesapeake. And, each Bay state has developed a clean water blueprint outlining the steps that must be taken to reduce pollution much further, so that we can fully restore water quality in local rivers, streams, and the Bay. But, at least one pollutant, nitrogen from agriculture in Pennsylvania, is increasing, and the Commonwealth is way off track to meet the goals it set. That has to change. And Pennsylvania and EPA must effectively carry out their roles to make sure it does.

I'm Will Baker, President of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. Welcome to the third segment of our new podcast series, *Turning the Tide, Saving the Chesapeake Bay*.

People often ask me why the Bay is not getting better, so I thought I would share my thoughts on that subject. **The answer is surprisingly, the Bay is getting better.** Let me give you a few examples. [Oysters](#) are coming back—in fact, they haven't been this good since back in the mid-1980s. [Underwater grasses](#) are a little bit more modest, but they're starting to rebound, especially in the Susquehanna flats and in some other areas around the Bay. And, water clarity is improving. And the dead zone is starting to retreat, modestly, but it's a start, we can celebrate. You can read more on our web site, CBF.org.

The next question I get is what's driving this improvement? Bottom line, taxpayers and ratepayers have funded upgrades to sewage treatment plants throughout the region—literally millions of pounds of pollution have been kept out of the Bay and its rivers and streams. That's really good news.

But there is better news, especially when we look out well into the future. Each state has developed a [Clean Water Blueprint](#) outlining the steps that must be taken to reduce pollution much further, to fully restore water quality in all the rivers, streams, and the Bay. [The states have committed](#) to implementing 60 percent of these practices by 2017, and to finish the job entirely by 2025. Of course then, we'll have a big job just trying to hold the gains we have made.

What's remarkable is that the states have committed to work in two-year increments that must be fully transparent. They must plan, implement, monitor, and report on progress every two years towards the final 2025 deadline. In this way we'll know if the process is on track, and we'll know if they're falling behind.

Turning the Tide, Saving the Chesapeake Bay

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation's biweekly, Tuesday morning podcast

And there's one more element that is even more remarkable. The states are doing all of this in partnership with the feds, through EPA, the federal [Environmental Protection Agency](#). The states have actually given EPA the hammer, so to speak, to bring it down on them if they do fall behind. There is a very clear understanding that EPA must be the enforcer, and if a state or more than one state falls behind EPA will impose sanctions, such as withholding grant funding, withdrawing permitting authority—things like that.

So everything is fine, right? No need to worry anymore about the Bay now!

Sorry, but that's just not true! There is a dark cloud on the horizon, one which puts our health, the safety of our drinking water, and even our economy at risk, much less the overall water quality of the Bay. It is an effort by a very powerful, very wealthy group of [agro-industrial lobbying associations](#), willing to spend any amount of money necessary to derail the process. They are not from around here. They're outsiders, so to speak. They represent the huge agricultural industries of the mid-west. The Fertilizer Institute, the Grain Growers, the Hog Council just to name a few. And they have persuaded [21 Attorney's General](#), from as far away as some of the more western states to join them.

Their argument is that the federal government has overreached. Even though this is a partnership, they're saying this is unconstitutional federal overreach. They're trying to convince [the federal courts](#) to throw this whole process out the window. So far, the courts are holding firm and a major decision is pending now with the third circuit court in Philadelphia. That's the last step before the Supreme Court, if the Supreme Court decides to take the case. We're pretty positive that the law will be upheld. This is really about the federal [Clean Water Act](#) and its ability to do the right things in supporting clean water.

We're fully committed. But we're not in the clear, even if we do hold off this legal assault. We have one element of the Bay restoration problem that is right here in the watershed and maybe it's even more of a concern when you think about it.

It's the [Susquehanna River](#). **The mighty Susquehanna provides half the fresh water entering the Bay. Think about that. This one river supplies as much as all of the other rivers combined.** The [James](#), the [York](#), the [Rappahannock](#), the [Patuxent](#), the Eastern Shore rivers—the [Chester](#), the [Choptank](#), the [Nanticoke](#). Add all of them together, and don't forget the [Potomac](#), and you still don't have as much pollution and as much fresh water as is coming down the Susquehanna. It's the largest source of course, and much of that pollution comes from the agricultural sector.

Recent scientific estimates show that instead of declining, at least one pollutant, [nitrogen from agriculture](#) in Pennsylvania, and even upstate New York, is increasing, and that [the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is way off track to meet the goals it set](#).

But here is an interesting twist. You might say it's a crisis that doesn't have to be.

There are some silver linings in those dark clouds. Reducing pollution from agriculture is much, much less costly than upgrading [sewage treatment plants](#) or reducing [polluted runoff](#) from our

Turning the Tide, Saving the Chesapeake Bay

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation's biweekly, Tuesday morning podcast

city streets and our parking lots. I have been meeting with top officials in [Governor Tom Wolf's](#) administration who fully acknowledge that not enough was done by prior administrations and they are committed to do what needs to be done going forward.

Pennsylvania does have the laws and regulations, which if enforced, would significantly reduce pollution. **The problem is inspections of small farms in targeted watersheds have found that less than one in three is in compliance.** Less than one in three of the small farms are in compliance.

Governor Wolf has inherited a regulatory bureaucracy woefully inadequate to enforce current laws. Only six inspectors are employed to review compliance of more than 45,000 farms. **Six inspectors for 45,000 farms.** At the current pace of inspection, it would take 160 years to visit all of Pennsylvania's farms just once.

That has to change. And EPA must effectively carry out its role to make sure it does.

Meeting Pennsylvania's commitments will provide significant economic benefits to both the Commonwealth and the region. [CBF's peer-reviewed economic report](#) found that once the Blueprint is fully implemented, and the benefits fully realized, the value of the natural services provided in the Commonwealth alone would increase by [\\$6.2 billion annually](#), from \$32.6 to \$38.8 billion dollars annually.

Meeting its commitments will also leave a legacy of clean water for all future generations right in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

CBF is increasing our presence in the Commonwealth because as the old saying makes clear, "As goes the Susquehanna, so goes the Chesapeake Bay."

We are heartened by the Wolf Administration's commitment to address these challenges, a commitment that we will not only encourage, we'll be cheering, but we will also monitor.

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