

SENATOR BENJAMIN L. CARDIN (D-MD)
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, & FORESTRY
HEARING ON
CONSERVATION POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE FARM BILL
Tuesday, May 1, 2007
2:00 p.m.

Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Chambliss, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear at today's hearing to present comments on the USDA conservation programs now under review as you consider conservation policy recommendations for the 2007 Farm Bill.

This bill is vitally important to the nation and to Maryland. Federal farm support, food assistance, agricultural trade, marketing, and rural development policies are all covered under the Farm Bill.

Agriculture is Maryland's largest industry. The state's 12,100 farms cover more than 2 million acres and produced \$1.3 billion of agricultural products. I now have the privilege of representing the entire State of Maryland, which means that I represent those 12,100 farms and the people who operate them.

But the reason that I asked to come before the Committee today is not limited to the importance of agriculture to Maryland.

The Chesapeake Bay is America's largest estuary. The watershed covers 64,000 square miles. The Bay and its tidal rivers have more shoreline than the entire western coast of the United States. The Chesapeake is central to the economy, history, culture and social fabric of my state and this entire region. The capital cities of Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia sit along major tributaries of the Chesapeake, as does this, the Nation's Capital.

All of us recognize that the health Chesapeake Bay is at risk. Every summer we see low oxygen "dead zones" and historically low numbers of blue crabs and native oysters.

In response to this challenge, the Bay states have adopted the most comprehensive watershed cleanup strategy in the nation. More than 450 wastewater treatment facilities are being required by federally enforceable permits to cut their nitrogen and phosphorus discharges substantially. The Maryland legislature just passed a law that will require the removal of all phosphorus from dishwashing soaps, just as it had earlier eliminated this pollutant from laundry detergent. Scotts, the nation's largest lawn care company, has signed an agreement with the Bay states that the company will cut the amount of phosphorus in its do-it-yourself lawn fertilizer by 50 percent within two years. Each of the Bay states has adopted nitrogen oxide air pollution control programs that go beyond federal requirements. Those programs translate into less nitrogen deposition into Bay waters where it fuels harmful algal blooms.

I mention all these non-agricultural initiatives because it is vitally important that we ask all segments of society and all sectors of the economy to contribute their fair share in the effort to restore the Bay.

Wastewater treatment plants, atmospheric deposition of reactive nitrogen, and stormwater

runoff from our suburban and urban lawns are all major sources of the excess nitrogen and phosphorus pollution that are harming the Chesapeake. The Bay states and the federal government have plans to address those pollution loads, and all those sectors need to do even more to reduce their pollution loads to the Bay.

But one of the single largest sources of excess nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment into the Bay is agriculture.

The USDA's conservation programs are critically important to both sustaining agriculture and simultaneously minimizing its impact on the water resources of the basin. Chesapeake Bay watershed farmers have made extensive use of existing conservation programs and support their expansion under the 2007 Farm Bill.

The reliance upon existing conservation programs and the desire for their expansion, particularly in terms of funding level support, may not be unique to the Bay region, but it is nonetheless uniquely critical to the success of its restoration strategy. That need for expansion is matched by an unmet demand that already exists from USDA's customer base in the region under existing programmatic scope and funding levels.

As you begin to craft the conservation title of the next Farm Bill, I ask you to give the farmers of the Chesapeake region the tools they need to be successful... both in the marketplace and as stewards of this national treasure, the Chesapeake Bay.

Specifically, I ask you to:

? Double funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and other working lands programs, and reserve a percentage of the funds for states that demonstrate a high level of performance with these programs. Remove acreage criteria from allocation formulas for financial assistance.

? Establish an EQIP-type program to support non-industrial private forest owners in their installation of BMPs and incorporate the Watershed Forestry Assistance programs established under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 into the Forestry Title of the Farm Bill.

? Expand funding for Conservation Innovation Grants to \$100 million nationwide.

? Support the creation of a national \$200 million/year Regional Water Enhancement Program to target and leverage funding in states, including the Chesapeake Bay states, with the greatest potential for meaningful and measured water quality improvement.

? Expand Conservation Security Program (CSP) availability to all eligible farmers, nationwide. If this is not possible, expand the program eligibility to encourage farming efforts that address water quality impairments. CSP should be made available in areas such as the Chesapeake Bay, to all farmers who meet the required high levels of environmental performance.

? Expand Technical Assistance nationwide, both pre- and post-application process, and establish a comprehensive technical assistance demonstration program in the Chesapeake Bay

to determine the potential outcome of enhanced technical assistance, outreach and education at levels to match need.

? Provide \$300 million annually for the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, with block grants to states with well-established conservation easement programs.

? Reauthorize programs such as Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), with increased focus on partial versus whole field, to increase focus on riparian and floodplain areas and measurable environmental improvement. Allow targeted, well-managed harvesting of cellulosic biomass from Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands for the purpose of generating energy while protecting water quality.

? Ensure a diversified national energy portfolio that includes the use of animal manure and cellulosic biomass to promote farm viability and protects both our air and water resources.

The needs in the Chesapeake watershed are great, but we have farmers with a track record of supporting every conservation program that government has made available to them. We owe it to our farmers, and we owe it to the Chesapeake.

Thank you for your time, and I would be happy to answer any questions .