

Md. unveils expanded conservation effort

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — Maryland Secretary of Agriculture Wayne Cawley has unveiled plans for beefing up the state's soil conservation program to help clean up the Chesapeake Bay.

Speaking at the Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts' (MASCD) winter meeting in Ocean City last week, Cawley said that he was confident that his department would receive the additional \$1.5 million in administrative funds and \$7 million in cost share funds that was requested from the Governor.

The money is needed, he said, because "our system has lost much of its efficiency. Programs have grown faster than (districts') abilities to administer them."

The funds would be used to finance a five-point plan which would include upgrading district staff to a minimum base level, targeting additional support to areas with critical soil and water problems, expanding conservation research and education programs, providing additional cost share money to farmers to offset the cost of installing practices and proceeding with enforcement action against farmers "who outright refuse to cooperate."

Cawley also announced that there would be a reorganization of the state funded conservation program. The State Soil Conservation Committee would become strictly a policy setting board and administrative and personnel matters would be handled by a new staff person who would report to the Secretary.

He reassured those present that the reorganization would not affect the independence of the 24 local soil conservation districts.

"Districts are the most capable and the best equipped organizations to control nonpoint source pollution," said Cawley. He added, however, that he was "firmly convinced that unless agriculture can demonstrate that we can effectively handle the nonpoint pollution program, we could lose control."

At their business session, MASCD members voiced support for bay cleanup proposals, calling on the Governor and general assembly to enact them in the upcoming legislative session.

Conservation officials are becoming increasingly concerned about the high erosion rates on leased farmland. According to Gerald R. Calhoun, Soil Conservation Service, the amount of land owned by absentee landowners is increasing and so is erosion. "Farmers who lease land on a year-to-year basis are reluctant to spend money on conservation measures when they can't be assured of reaping the benefits," he said.

District officials called on the state and federal governments to set an example for private landowners by requiring conservation plans on publicly owned land.

MASCD will ask the Governor to direct state agencies to set priorities for getting conservation measures completed on state-owned land used for agriculture within the next five years. They will also ask that long-term leases, which would require renters to follow a conservation plan, be mandated. They voted to ask the Maryland congressional delegation to introduce legislation requiring the same thing on federally owned land.

In other actions, MASCD members passed resolutions

— to ask the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service to cost-share on sub-surface drainage and

— reaffirming their own commitment to their role as local conservation leaders.



Maryland Secretary of Agriculture Wayne Cawley, right, sports a cap with the State Soil Conservation Committee's new logo for water quality. The logo, which includes the slogan "Maryland Farmers: Partners with the Bay," is intended to make farmers and the public aware that agriculture can help clean up the Chesapeake. Presenting the cap at the Maryland Association of Soil Conservation Districts meeting in Ocean City last week was Joseph Scott, chairman of their information and education committee.

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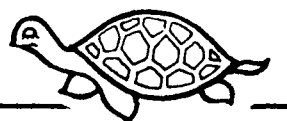
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