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Speaking in One Voice: Developing a Universal Agricultural Conservation Language within the Chesapeake Bay Watershed

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Abstract Text:

The Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) is a regional partnership facilitating the restoration activities of local, state and federal governments; non-profit organizations; watershed residents; and leading academic institutions throughout the watershed. The program was established in 1983 with the signing of the Chesapeake Bay Agreement between the signatories of the state of Maryland; the commonwealths of Pennsylvania and Virginia; the District of Columbia; the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; and the Chesapeake Bay Commission. The headwater states of Delaware, New York and West Virginia were later included in the CBP partnership with the signing of the Chesapeake 2000 agreement to guide restoration efforts through 2010. A fundamental element of the CBP has been the measurement of progress by the partnership through the tracking of implemented conservation practices, also known as Best Management Practices (BMPs). Early in the program, the state partners choose not to utilize the existing USDA agricultural conservation language for reporting, but instead developed a language unique to the CBP, which still exists today. This use of a unique language has hindered the efforts of the CBP to fully engage USDA agencies in the restoration efforts, and has subsequently prevented a thorough tracking of conservation implementation throughout the watershed. These limitations were recognized in 2006 in an evaluation report published jointly by the Offices of Inspector General for EPA and USDA, which recommended that a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) be implemented between the two agencies to improve restoration coordination. With the re-direction of staff resources by agencies and the partnership, including the completion of a new MOU in 2007, progress is now being achieved towards the development of a new universal agricultural conservation language. Program and state-by-state differences in conservation practice definitions on both the state and federal levels are being focused on to enable improved communication and coordination.

Impact Statement:

Multiple accomplishments facilitating improved watershed management have been achieved thus far. Included is the development of a reference guide to assist the partnership and USDA agencies in understanding the conservation practice relationships between the two languages for improved communication and implementation analysis. Another is the formation of USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) workgroups on agronomy and livestock management issues involving CBP and NRCS staff from six states to cooperatively develop uniform NRCS conservation practice definitions and planning tools; to assist with data collection and research; as well as to provide technical assistance to the CBP on universal language development.