

Addressing Water Quality and the Bottom Line

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Water quality issues are becoming big issues in many states, and many groups are working to find ways to improve water quality. The struggle has been to find a balance that addresses water quality goals as while keeping businesses economically viable. Farmers have become a big part of this conversation with many adopting new processes to help reduce their impact on water quality.

“The United States needs agriculture, and Agriculture needs water” said Paul Genoa as he highlighted the relationship between agriculture, the economy and water. Encouraging a conversation about the need for a national plan to address water supply, use management and the creation of a long term US water policy.

Ann Swanson talked about the efforts of the Chesapeake Bay Commission to address water quality in the bay. The Bay has 11,000 miles of shoreline and 17 million people living in the watershed leading to many impacts on water quality. They have instituted a market based nutrient trading program that will reduce overall nutrient run off. In one example she mentioned how the cost to treat nitrogen runoff from street sweepers would be almost \$2000 per pound of nitrogen while that same pound of nitrogen runoff could be achieved on a farm for less than \$10. This creates opportunities for agriculture to reduce its nitrogen runoff and sell those reduction credits to cities for a profit; thus creating a new revenue stream for farmers.

Claire Schary continued the discussion about water quality trading programs but transition the discussion to temperature instead of nutrients. She encouraged the use of firm cap to drive a trading program and that if managed well the program can help minimize costs of achieving TMDLs. However there is a concern with trading programs as the Clean Water Act does not explicitly allow them, which makes the EPA vulnerable to lawsuits for not strictly enforcing the law.

Dave Tuthil finished the session by reminding everyone that this is all still a work in progress. “Is it possible to improve water quality and agriculture’s bottom line? Yes, but we aren’t there yet” Finishing out the program he encouraged continued dialogue and working together because “the old stick hasn’t worked in 40 years. We think it is the carrot approach that will.”