

Activists remain hopeful about Chesapeake Bay Cleanup talks include ways to reduce runoff

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Years of attempts to clean up the Chesapeake Bay have fallen short and there is continuing opposition to tougher regulation, but a panel of environmental activists that included the Obama administration's point man for bay cleanup said Saturday there is still reason to hope that anti-pollution efforts will succeed.

The group gathered at the Museum of Industry in Baltimore, once the site of an oyster-packing plant, to discuss ways that community groups and individuals could improve water quality in the nation's largest estuary - which sustains not only thousands of wildlife species, but recreational opportunities and a slice of Maryland's economy.

"The bay is difficult to restore," Gerald Winegrad, a former state senator from Annapolis and longtime bay advocate, told a group of activists and citizens. "It's shallow without a lot of flushing action, but a lot of people are flushing into it."

Against an Inner Harbor backdrop, speakers talked about nitrogen, phosphorus, trash and other pollutants that flow into the bay through urban and suburban storm drains and from farms.

The suggestions included individual actions to reduce runoff. Among them: installing rain barrels and rain gardens and planting trees, said Halle Van der Gaag, director of the Jones Falls Watershed Association. Also, picking up trash, which is enormously costly to clean from the harbor, said Celeste Amato, director of Baltimore City's Cleaner Greener Office.

It will soon get costlier when new federal rules require the city to do more about litter, she added.

Others at the event, sponsored by Baltimore Green Works, the Herring Run Watershed Association and the Museum of Industry, talked about efforts to pass new anti-pollution legislation. But there wasn't universal agreement that more laws and regulations are the answer.

Even as the Maryland General Assembly considers measures that would strengthen clean water laws, it is also considering delaying and weakening storm water pollution controls that are being placed on new development. Developers, along with some lawmakers who initially supported stronger controls, now say the controls would be too costly and would cause some development plans to be abandoned.

At the federal level, Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin, a Maryland Democrat, has met strong opposition from other senators from neighboring states to a bill he introduced to expand government authority to regulate all sources of bay pollution. They complain it would usurp state authority and harm rural communities.

J. Charles Fox, senior adviser on the bay to the Environmental Protection Agency, said the Obama administration is using existing powers and pursuing broad new authority to clean up the bay. But the agency must work within a cumbersome system, and new regulations for urban and farm pollution could take years, he said.

Fox said officials plan to push the state to make changes and reinvigorate lagging restoration efforts by reviewing permits it issues and withholding funding for water infrastructure improvements.

"We have more cops back on the beat," he said. "We're stepping up. But others need to, also."