

Permit needs to protect public health, keep excess manure from polluting waterways

The state must make an important decision about how to regulate manure generated by large poultry and dairy farms that pollute the Chesapeake Bay and Maryland waters. Manure waste, like sewage and toxic air emissions, is regulated because it causes harm by contaminating our water.

The reality is that our pollution-reduction practices have not done enough and phosphorus pollution — of which more than 50 percent comes from manure — is rising. Maryland's animal farms produce an enormous amount of poultry waste, enough to fill M&T Bank Stadium two times annually.

It is all Marylanders' responsibility to ensure manure does not harm our beautiful rivers, streams, drinking water and the Chesapeake Bay. The Maryland Department of the Environment, jointly with the Maryland Department of Agriculture, holds the regulatory responsibility to ensure that doesn't happen.

Today, the department is considering renewal of the permit that governs Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations. As with other permits and regulations that seek to protect the environment and public health, this commonsense permit is under threat by strong special interest groups.

The Department of the Environment states the CAFO permit is required to protect water quality. With layer after layer of manure being spread on fields already oversaturated with phosphorus pollution, the state needs the strongest permit possible.

The latest data provided by farmers to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the state Department of the Environment, compiled by the Environmental Integrity Project, shows manure from poultry farms on the Eastern Shore is being overapplied to farmland and, even when exported from our animal farms, does not usually leave the county of origin. The manure is staying on our land and running into our local rivers and streams. We need to better protect public health and clean water by ensuring accuracy and transparency on manure reporting and compliance with current regulations.

The proposed permit would change the requirement for farmers to inspect their manure sheds from once a week to only once a year. Extreme weather and other issues can and do damage these sheds, which leads to manure running into local rivers and streams. This is a threat to public health. Operators simply must be required to continue to inspect the manure sheds weekly.

Part of making sure farmers keep their farms clean and protect local waters is to ensure excess manure is not spread on fields. Past analysis by the U.S.D.A. has

indicated even if CAFO farmers fully utilized the crop and pastureland under their control for manure application, only 40 percent of the manure nitrogen and 30 percent of the manure phosphorous could be absorbed.

The state allows excess manure to be stored uncovered in piles on fields, yet the permit does not track where this excess manure is stored. With so much excess pollutants produced and stored in our watershed, careful manure storage and tracking of where it is applied is essential to reducing discharges of these contaminants into our water.

When the new permit was approved five years ago, it assumed farming operations would pay a fee, using the funds generated for inspections. But despite a serious lack of resources, Maryland has yet to charge for these permits, leaving more than \$400,000 of resources to keep our water clean unclaimed. Such a fee structure would cost a smaller farm about \$250 per year, a manageable expense that would support efforts to protect the environment. These permit fees are simply the cost of doing business.

But costs should not fall on the farm operator alone. After all, the chickens are being raised for a corporation — with the corporation's equipment and standards imposed. Big agriculture corporations that make billions in profits should pay their fair share for this permit fee to ensure their chickens are raised on a clean farm that protects our waters.

The main goal of the CAFO permit is to protect public health by keeping manure from contaminating our local rivers, streams and Chesapeake Bay. This permit is a standard for farmers to follow the same way we have a speed limit for drivers. Most farmers abide by these rules, but they are in place to keep us all safe.

As part of the Maryland Clean Agriculture Coalition, Waterkeepers Chesapeake, strongly urge the Maryland Department of the Environment to carefully review all of the public comments submitted and make the necessary changes to achieve that goal.

This is the first time this permit has come up for renewal, and we won't get another chance for another five years. For the sake of clean water and our public health, we can't wait.

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