

# Midwest agriculture faces tough choices

## Key Points

- Illinois farmers find ag regulations on the Chesapeake Bay challenging.
- EPA's Chesapeake Bay Model could have severe Midwest fiscal implications.
- Mississippi River Basin watershed acreage is 4.5 times Chesapeake Bay's.

By JOHN VOGEL

**F**IVE Illinois Soybean Association farmers recently returned home somewhat spooked by their three-day fact-finding mission to Eastern Shore Maryland and Delaware. The most cogent take-home message was: U.S. EPA's Chesapeake Bay (water cleanup) Model may be headed to the Midwest.

Regulations would impact all farmland — not just concentrated animal feeding operations, predicts Richard Wilkins, first vice president of the American Soybean Association.

Led by ISA Production Committee Chairman Donald Guinnip of Marshall, the fact-finding team included Daryl Cates of Columbia, David Droste of Nashville, John Longley of Aledo and Carrie Winkelmann of Tallula. Their goal is to develop a voluntary program to address water quality issues. However, time, politics and state fiscal constraints may make both mandatory and voluntary programs difficult.

Illinois livestock producers may be ahead of the curve when it comes to cleaning up their portion of water pollution to Mississippi River Basin watersheds, contends Guinnip.

But planting the Chesapeake Bay clean-up model on the farm shorelines of Mississippi watersheds would pose much greater challenges to farming and funding.

Waterkeeper environmental groups on the lower Mississippi River already have threatened to bring suit against EPA and the Army Corp of Engineers, adds Wilkins, the Greenwood, Del., farmer who hosted the Illinois fact-finders.

The latest threat came in March when the Des Moines Water Works filed a lawsuit against three northern Iowa drainage districts for nitrate pollution of the Raccoon River watershed. Wilkins believes the Iowa lawsuit may be a likely Chesapeake Bay Model precursor — just as the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's initial lawsuit against EPA was the trigger for EPA's nitrogen and phosphorus pollution diet for the bay.

### Field-by-field monitoring

The Chesapeake Bay Model, if imposed on the Mississippi River Basin, might mandate that all 13 states in the basin develop watershed implementation plans (WIPs) covering all croplands, not just CAFOs. Some of the six Chesapeake Bay watershed states have voluntary nutrient management programs. But only Delaware and Maryland are close to being on track for EPA's WIP goals.

Both states' programs are mandatory for all farms exceeding 10 acres and applying manure or commercial fertilizer. Certified nutrient management plans are keyed to soil-type yield goals by field.

The Illinois farmers were shocked by



Upper Mississippi Basin: 121 million acres

Lower Mississippi Basin: 67 million acres

Chesapeake Bay Watershed: 41 million acres

the extensive N and P management records on all fields, the equally extensive best management practices necessary, and the education and regulatory oversight required. Back home, most farmers would be shell-shocked if such detailed nutrient management paperwork were required, says David Droste, ISA's treasurer.

High nitrates in the Kankakee River and Lake Springfield are already well-known problems, says Guinnip. Shifting away from fall and spring preplant anhydrous application to planting time and postemergence 28% N solution split-applications would require a monumental equipment change for much of the Midwest, he adds. And Midwest farmers are just beginning to learn about soluble P's role in lake and estuary algae blooms.

### Show us the money

The second most important Midwest take-home message was: The Mid-Atlantic states have already invested billions of dollars in research, education, technical



**WIPS ARE COMING?** "EPA will try to use strong-arm tactics," warns Richard Wilkins, first vice president of the American Soybean Association.

assistance, cost-sharing and monitoring of even voluntary nutrient management programs. Maryland, alone, commits more than \$22 million annually just for 478,000 acres of cover crop payments.

Guinnip and the others clearly want to keep Illinois' watershed cleanup role

voluntary. But they worry about bringing all those elements together — especially the funding.

While U.S. EPA and USDA have been major partners in the Chesapeake Bay cleanup, Mississippi River Basin acreage more than quadruples that of the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Illinois' 2015-16 state budget — not just its Ag Department budget — has been slashed, according to Guinnip. Some conservation districts, a key cog in the Bay Model, exist in name only, with few or no staff. Yet, conservation districts and Natural Resources Conservation Service staff play crucial roles in placing cost-shared best management practices in high-priority Chesapeake Bay watersheds.

### Not just a farm problem

Municipalities and non-agricultural industries have a big stick in the "Big Muddy" — and the Chesapeake Bay cleanup. Their roles as point-source polluters in the Bay Model were partially deflected due to political costs and real costs.

But now, they, too, are being pressed by EPA to do more to stem the dumping of raw sewage and stormwaters resulting from heavy rainfall and overloaded systems. Municipal water treatment bills have doubled in many communities, leading to record-level payment defaults. EPA's recent assessment of the Chesapeake Bay states indicates that none are meeting all WIP goals.

Pennsylvania, the region's largest ag state, has taken a voluntary approach to the bay cleanup. But in a recent EPA letter, it was warned: "To ensure compliance with the required reductions, the Commonwealth must accelerate its work to reduce the amount of nitrogen and sediment released into the Chesapeake Bay watershed by 2017."

If that sounds like bullying, that's what it is. "EPA will try to use strong-arm tactics," affirms Wilkins.

Bottom line: The Illinois fact-finders returned home less optimistic of the chances of a successful voluntary Mississippi River Basin cleanup model.



**MANAGEMENT BY THE ACRE:** Illinois Soybean Association members (from left) Donald Guinnip, David Droste, John Longley, Daryl Cates and Carrie Winkelmann were awestruck by the details in the 3-inch-thick nutrient and conservation management plan book required for all 2,000 acres of Kevin Evan's Bridgeville, Del., crop farm.