

Stormwater runoff mandate

Posted: Friday, March 8, 2013 6:00 am

Gov. Martin O'Malley held a Monday meeting in Annapolis with county and local officials on the subject of reducing stormwater runoff. According to the Associated Press story, attendees may have left the day-long gathering still wondering how they could meet the new requirements.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency is leading a new effort to restore the health and vitality of the Chesapeake Bay, and is pushing for dramatic reductions of runoff pollution. Maryland Secretary of the Environment Robert Summers noted at the meeting that efforts to reduce pollution from farming and improve sewage treatment plant discharge and runoff from farms have paid dividends, but added, "We need to begin to turn the tide on stormwater as well."

That mandate may be the most complicated and expensive of all the efforts to upgrade the quality of the bay's ecosystem.

State environment and natural resources officials told attendees that grants and other financial assistance is available for them. But the amounts they mentioned, e.g., \$33 million in the proposed bay trust fund budget for fiscal 2014, will be of limited help in this huge undertaking.

For example, Somerset County Planning Director Gary Pusey has done a little figuring and the numbers he came up with are scary. His office examined 20 runoff-control projects, whose total cost would be \$1 million and would cut nitrogen runoff by 145 pounds a year. The problem is that Somerset needs to reduce its nitrogen runoff by 37,000 pounds. Let's see, 37,000 divided by 145, times \$1 million.

Some practical information was dispensed at the meeting, such as the benefits of "harvesting asphalt" to reduce surfaces that contribute to stormwater runoff. Pusey noted, however, that lots of these surfaces are now privately owned, and Calvert County Commissioner Susan Shaw said that a quarter of her county's residents live in communities that were built without any stormwater control engineering.

O'Malley kicked off the meeting by acknowledging the magnitude of this challenge, then urged local officials to tap into their employees' resourcefulness and innovative ideas — to "please unleash that creativity."

We put great stock in the creativity and innovative spirit of rank-and-file employees, which if put to work will surely result in some productive ideas. Still, we wonder if the cost to meet the stormwater runoff reduction goals is something that counties such as Frederick, and their residents, can possibly afford to meet.

The importance of restoring the Chesapeake Bay can barely be overstated, but doing so by imposing unmanageable costs on local jurisdictions and their residents is neither a reasonable nor productive way to proceed.

If ever a project needed to go back to the drawing board, it's this one.