

Bay TMDL Messages
Water Quality Team
October 5, 2009

EPA is working with the six Chesapeake Bay-region states, the District of Columbia and others to determine watershed-wide, river basin and local scale pollution limits needed to achieve clean water standards in the Bay and its tidal tributaries.

The establishment of these pollution “loads” or limits is part of the larger process of developing a Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) for the Bay and its watershed.

A draft Bay TMDL, a mandatory pollution diet for the Chesapeake Bay and its surrounding watershed and airshed, will be issued for public comment in June 2010 and is scheduled to be finalized by December 2010.

The setting of target loads - at the watershed-wide, river basin and local scales - will continue to be informed by the latest scientific data and model improvements over the coming months as the draft TMDL is established. The loads will be set at levels that will meet the states’ established Bay water quality standards, which are protective of the Bay’s living resources – fish, crabs, oysters and underwater grasses, among others.

At this early juncture in the process, the Bay Program’s Principals’ Staff Committee (PSC) will consider “working targets” for nitrogen and phosphorus to enable the watershed states and the District of Columbia to initiate pollution reduction plans under the TMDL.

These “working targets” of approximately 200 million pounds of nitrogen and 15 million pounds of phosphorus per year reflect the latest information generated through the Bay Program’s world-class scientific tools and partner determinations, including:

- Establishment of a three-year “critical period” (1993-1995) to best represent the total load the Bay can receive when conditions make water quality standards more difficult to achieve. If water quality standards are achieved during these “critical periods,” they will be achieved during other times.
- Updated Bay dissolved oxygen criteria assessment “reference curves” using an improved, independently-reviewed methodology to determine conditions needed to protect living resources.

These working targets will continue to evolve as final model calibrations and upcoming information on atmospheric deposition loads, local water quality needs, ocean influence and oyster and menhaden filtering impacts are integrated into the larger body of new and better scientific understanding of the Bay ecosystem.

At its meeting on October 23, 2009, the PSC will also consider options for dividing the total basin-wide target loads among the major river basins and the six watershed states and the District of Columbia.

In parallel, the partners are working to better understand the level of on-the-ground nutrient and sediment reduction actions that will be needed to achieve the eventual Bay TMDL loading caps. Part of this effort includes understanding what load reductions would be expected upon full implementation of the jurisdictions' current cleanup plans, or tributary strategies.

Similar to the continued evolution of the working targets for loads, the partners' understanding of what levels of pollution reduction actions will be necessary will also continue to evolve in the coming months.

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