

# Watershed Challenges

Cleaning up pollutants in the Chesapeake Bay is relatively easy. The harder part is getting upstream communities to care.

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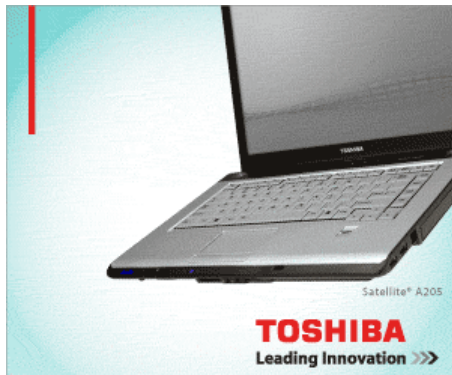
**C**leaning up the nation's watersheds will be slow and complicated going. That's one lesson to be drawn from two decades of work by 4,000 or more institutions of government around Chesapeake Bay, North America's largest estuary, which drains six states and the District of Columbia.

Another conclusion, according to a study by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) released in April, is that the United States Environmental Protection Agency needs to get better at partnering with state and local governments as well as community leaders to finish the job of environmental protection.

The Chesapeake Bay program was the forerunner for later comprehensive regional initiatives attempting to restore water quality in the Great Lakes, the Everglades, Puget Sound, and other large water bodies. The Chesapeake campaign goes back to the Reagan administration, after scientists demonstrated that nutrients and sediments washing from the bay's 64,000-square-mile watershed had left 90 percent of its waters in impaired condition. In 1984, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency launched a multi-state Chesapeake Bay program. Governments in the region spent \$3.7 billion between 1995 and 2004 upgrading sewage treatment and stemming the flow of widely dispersed pollutants into the 36 tributaries that feed water into the bay. That's achieved considerable progress, but the Chesapeake cleanup still will fall short of a court-ordered 2010 deadline.

The chief culprit: nutrient runoff from upstream farms and suburban sprawl that each year covers more land with homes, parking lots, and fertilized lawns and golf courses. In a report called *Taking Environmental Protection to the Next Level*, a NAPA panel determined that the six-state cleanup had significantly improved the bay's condition through conventional government regulation that has upgraded sewage treatment, limited industrial discharges, and reduced airborne auto tailpipe emissions. But those "point-source" pollutants contribute only about 20 percent of the bay's nutrient and sediment loads. And the cleanup campaign is still figuring out how to combine efforts by six states, 23 federal agencies, 3,169 local governments, 678 watershed associations, 30 regional government councils, 87,000 farmers and more than five million homeowners to cut back nutrient-laden "non-point" runoff from fields, lawns, and parking lots that still degrade the bay's water quality.

Chesapeake Bay scientists have identified a host of best management practices for



controlling those pollutants, but it's not workable to mandate them through the command-and-control government regulation that enforces limits on point-source discharges. As a result, "the Bay remains unhealthy," the NAPA report says. "What is required to clean up the Bay is to clean up all the main sources of pollution, not just those for which clear regulatory programs have been established. But this conclusion presents quite a challenge. It requires breaking a lot of new ground."

The same challenge applies to roughly 40,000 rivers, lakes, and bays around the country where states have found water quality to be impaired. In addition to better science and sustainable funding, the panel contends that EPA needs to refocus on "a more systematic and holistic intergovernmental approach" to integrate its tried-and-true regulatory programs with voluntary partnerships with a broad array of local interests. That's a tough role for an agency that's widely viewed with suspicion, especially by farmers and small business owners who are fearful of government regulations. But "collaboration is no longer a matter of choice for EPA in deciding how environmental services will be delivered," the report says. "Collaboration is now an essential tool in addressing ecosystem and watershed-based problems that require cooperation from a wide range of actors."