DELMARVA LAND AND LITTER COLLABORATIVE

FARMER ENGAGEMENT SESSION ON TARGETED WATERSHED RESTORATION

HELD FEBUARY 2025

Summary and Takeaways

KEY FINDINGS

- **The ways in which water moves across Delmarva, and carries nutrients, are varied and complex.**
- **Understanding how nutrients move through the landscape is critical for farmers to help identify the most promising solutions.**

HEARING FROM FARMERS

The Delmarva Land and Litter Collaborative's (DLLC) Whole Systems Approach Workgroup hosted a farmer engagement session on targeted watershed restoration on February 28, 2025 to explore opportunities to improve water quality and habitat restoration.

Participants included four members from DLLC, four USGS experts on Delmarva hydrology and geography, and eight farmers (three are also NRCS/ SCD staff). The session included presentations about hydrology and how nutrients move on Delmarva, and discussions on how these principles can guide programs that focus efforts in small watersheds for targeted restoration.

DISCUSSION THEMES

Farmers at the session focused the discussion around understanding Delmarva hydrology, nutrient fate and transport, and lag time in water quality responses to landscape changes, noting opportunities to share similar presentations at other regional grower meetings. This group was open to a targeted approach to small-scale watershed restoration, especially in a farmer-led approach.

A few specific themes from the discussion:

- Farmers are the right messengers for engaging other farmers and should lead in identifying new solutions and incentives to test effectiveness and/or increase adoption.
  - Leverage existing farmer networks and involve them early in the process to select a small watershed to work in.
  - Plan meetings on familiar turf by meeting on a farm, at existing grower meetings, etc.

DISCUSSION THEMES (CONTINUED)

- Education on how nutrients move through the landscape is critical for farmers to help identify the most promising solutions. A watershed-scale restoration effort should invest time in the beginning to establish common understanding and explore the barriers and challenges to watershed restoration.
- Messaging should be clear and transparent.
  - Use plain language and avoid “model speak”
  - Highlight “what works” through success stories
  - Utilize social media
- Restoration efforts should include other stakeholders at the table, including private industry (poultry companies, grain buyers, service providers, etc.) to develop or promote incentive programs, expertise to help farmers test new and innovative practices, or others with interest in supporting the project.

CONSIDERATIONS & QUESTIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

- Not all watersheds are created equal. Flow, topography, soils, etc. are different. Delmarva watersheds are very diverse in land uses. The group questioned if assumptions about large scale watershed restoration could be skewed because of the diversity of land use in small watersheds.
- It is important to highlight that keeping levels of nitrogen, phosphorus, and total suspended sediment down, while increasing yield on fewer acres, has been a huge win.
- Watershed groups should prioritize one nutrient or impairment at a time to focus on.
- Watershed restoration efforts aren’t happening in a vacuum. How will groups/partners connect with other farmer-led initiatives to share successes and lessons learned?
- How is progress tracked in the small watershed? If data is collected, who is responsible for that? Is data shared, and if so, how?

Potential Next Steps

- Look for additional opportunities to share the environmental information that was presented at this meeting. Look for regional meetings to share information with farmers about hydrology, how nutrients move, residence time, etc.
- Look for funding sources to fund one or more pilot farmer-led projects. Can be a combination of established programs, industry initiatives and new funding. Consider compensating farmers for their time to participate in the group, not just for implementing BMPs.
- Conservation partners and industry groups can help to convene farmers initially and to identify a sub-watershed to test this approach. A watershed with increasing loading trends and not a lot of conservation practices would have a lot of potential for a pilot producer-led effort.
- Consider integration with Delaware’s Cover Crop Accelerator Project and similar efforts.

Resources

- Introduction & Background- Jen Nelson, DACD/MASCD
- Overview of Hydrology on Delmarva- Joshua Kasper, USGS
- SPARROW Model 101- Andrew Sekellick, USGS
- Delmarva Land and Litter Collaborative