

A Great First Step'

Gov. Touts Ag Program At Weyers Cave Farm

Posted: August 26, 2014

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Gov. Terry McAuliffe speaks at Cave View Farms in Weyers Cave on Monday morning. (Photos by Nikki Fox / DN-R)

WEYERS CAVE — With the rolling hills of the Shenandoah Valley and the Appalachian Mountains as a backdrop, Gov. Terry McAuliffe stood at a podium on Monday and touted Virginia's latest effort to protect and preserve the top two industries in the commonwealth.

After saying agriculture will play a "huge role" in his efforts to grow and diversify the state's economy, McAuliffe said the recently enacted Resource Management Planning program would help farmers make more money and protect the environment, which must be healthy for farms to survive.

"It's a common-sense idea because each farm has its own challenges and opportunities, and each farmer needs to be able to pick and choose the practices that work for them," he said during a program rollout event at Cave View Farms in Weyers Cave. "And this will help their bottom line. It will help them be more efficient and profitable. It will increase productivity and the health of livestock."

Agriculture is Virginia's leading industry, and tourism — key parts of which rely on clean waterways — is second.

"The South, the North and the Middle rivers in this area and the Chesapeake Bay's water quality can be improved" by implementing RMP practices, McAuliffe said. "We need to make sure we're sustaining fish and wildlife."

The RMP program is a voluntary effort that went into effect July 1.

It encourages farmers to use best practices to protect the environment by limiting runoff pollution into local waterways.

The program also helps the state track the efforts farms are making to protect the environment, which McAuliffe noted would allow farmers to "get the credit they deserve for their stewardship of Virginia's natural resources."

Encouraged by state agriculture officials, legislation was passed by the General Assembly in 2011 to authorize the implementation of the RMP program, and its regulations were hashed out by stakeholder groups over the next two years.

Michigan, Texas, New York and Louisiana are the only states with similar programs.

In exchange for developing and practicing an RMP, participating farmers are guaranteed to be considered compliant with all new state requirements for water quality for nine years, including regulations imposed to protect the Chesapeake Bay.

Inspections are to be performed every three years to make sure an RMP is being practiced.

The plans must be developed by a person certified by the state.

Funding is available to help with RMP development and implementation.

Agriculture is a \$55 billion industry statewide that provides 300,000 jobs, McAuliffe said, and he's leading efforts to push Virginia's farm exports to more than \$3 billion this year from \$2.85 billion last year.

RMPs can help protect it for future generations, he said.

"We must keep in mind," McAuliffe said, "the need for that growth to be sustainable."

One of the key components of the program is fencing streams so livestock can't get into them.

McAuliffe called such efforts "a great first step" because it enhances herd health and safety, helps cut veterinarian bills, and increases productivity.

"We've got more to do, and now is the time to do it," he said. "Resource Management Planning is part of keeping our promise to protect and preserve the Chesapeake Bay."

Other actions that can be taken include installing riparian buffers to filter runoff before it gets to a waterway and implementing nutrient management and soil conservation plans.

"This is proof that every now and again, government works," Del. Ed Scott, R-Madison, who carried the RMP legislation in the House of Delegates, told the crowd. "It's also proof of how proactive Virginia agriculture is about protecting the Chesapeake Bay and our environment."

Part of the challenge moving forward will be funding.

Cave View Farms, the Weyers Cave dairy operation that hosted Monday's event, was the site of a July meeting regarding a shortfall for a state livestock exclusion program.

State, federal and other officials gathered to figure out what to do after farmers had requested more funding assistance through the program than the state budgeted.

McAuliffe said he's been briefed on the situation, and despite a projected \$2.4 billion revenue shortfall for fiscal years 2014-16, he's hopeful money can be found to help farmers fence off their streams.

"We need to make sure programs that are working can continue by investing in them," he said. "If we want to encourage farmers to protect the environment for the next 20 to 30 years, we have to put money in to support them. Federal money is available for this. If there's federal money up there, I want it."

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