

Ending Big Chicken's Free Ride

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State and federal officials have long been aware of the pressing problem that industrial agriculture brings to the Chesapeake Bay, the largest estuary in the United States and one of the most important biologically productive estuaries in the world.¹ Unfortunately, elected officials and policymakers have passed the Bay clean-up costs to residents and refuse to make the chicken industry, a main polluter of the Bay, pay its fair share for the waste from its thousands of chicken factory farms.

Through the centuries, the Bay has served as a vital recreational and economic asset in the region, supporting a rich commercial fishing and crabbing industry and providing boating, swimming and other recreational activities. For the past few decades, however, this historic watershed has been suffering a slow death due to excess levels of pollutants,² like nitrogen and phosphorous, coming from manure that runs off of factory farms.

Pollution from these factory farms has had dramatic impacts on the fishing economy of the Bay, causing algae blooms that consume oxygen and create “dead zones” where fish and shellfish cannot survive, while also blocking sunlight from reaching underwater Bay grasses and the aquatic life on the floor of the Bay.³ Today, most of the Bay and its tidal waters are listed as “impaired waters.”

Despite this common knowledge, legislators have not implemented the kind of regulatory practices for the chicken industry that have worked to clean up other polluting industrial sectors. As the chicken industry has become increasingly concentrated, the powerful companies, like Perdue, that control the industry have been able to pay farmers a low wage while also avoiding paying a fair share to restore the Bay to its former glory. In fact, the residents of Maryland’s towns and cities have been forced to bear the economic brunt of these clean-up costs by paying into a Bay Restoration Fund while the chicken companies pay nothing.



The current structure of Maryland’s Bay Restoration Fund shows the inherent inequity of the current system in Maryland. Created in 2004, this dedicated fund is financed by residents and small businesses to help reduce the amount of pollutants being dumped into the Bay. It is residents who are being taxed to offset their own contribution of pollutants to the Bay while the chicken industry gets a free ride. While Perdue, the largest chicken company in Maryland, enjoys annual chicken sales of \$4.8 billion, the company pays nothing into the Bay Restoration Fund even though it generates 23.4 million pounds of nitrogen and 6.8 million pounds of phosphorous in the Bay watershed. In contrast, Maryland residents

and businesses have contributed \$501 million in restoration efforts since 2004.⁴ In fact, the chicken industry in Maryland receives taxpayer dollars to continue its unsustainable and polluting ways. Perdue alone has received over \$4.2 million in grants and payments from Maryland's taxpayers since 2008.

It is clear that legislators have been willing to burden their own constituents with clean up costs while mostly giving Maryland's chicken companies a pass from pollution laws. Legislators fully supported doubling the "flush tax" on their own local residents in 2012 while recently backing legislation in 2013 that gave the agricultural industry a free, ten-year pass from any new pollution laws passed by state or local governments. It's time for a change in Maryland, and it must start with our elected officials if the Bay is ever going to be restored. For Perdue, and the rest of big chicken, the free ride must end.

For more info, go to www.foodandwaterwatch.org/perdue-fairsharecampaign.html and sign the petition to make big chicken companies finally begin contributing to Bay restoration.

Endnotes

- 1 Exec. Order No. 13,508, 74 Fed. Reg. 23,099, 23,099. May 12, 2009.
- 2 Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load for Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Sediment. December 29, 2010 at ES-3. Available at http://www.epa.gov/reg3wapd/pdf/pdf_chesbay/FinalBayTMDL/CBayFinalTMDLExecSumSection1through3_final.pdf.
- 3 *Ibid* at 2-7.
- 4 Maryland Bay Restoration Fund Advisory Committee Annual Status Report. January 2013 at 1. Available at <http://www.mde.state.md.us/programs/Water/BayRestorationFund/AnnualReports/Pages/Water/CBWRF/annualreports/index.aspx>.



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