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FULL TEXT

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Minnesota will be the nation's first test site for a federal program designed to stem the flow of agricultural pollution strangling some of the country's great bodies of water, including Chesapeake Bay, the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi River.

Gov. Mark Dayton is expected to announce Minnesota's leading role in the project at the Capitol on Tuesday morning, with Tom Vilsack, U.S. secretary of agriculture, and Lisa Jackson, administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, at his side.

They are promoting the pilot project as the start of an ambitious federal strategy that, in essence, would give farmers a green seal of approval if they voluntarily choose to put land conservation and water quality ahead of crop yields.

Behind the new strategy is a combination of political and fiscal realities, officials said: The public is increasingly concerned about clean water for drinking, swimming and wildlife. But imposing environmental rules on farmers -- the primary source of unregulated water pollution in Minnesota -- faces insurmountable political hurdles. At the same time, funding for longstanding farm conservation programs is facing major cutbacks in the upcoming farm bill, victim of both the federal budget crunch and the anti-regulatory fervor in Washington.

"We do not want to take a step back" in conservation, Vilsack said in an interview last week. "We are seeing progress."

Farmers who participate would agree to follow land management practices that slow soil erosion and runoff of fertilizers, pesticides and manure into streams and groundwater. In exchange, they would get financial and technical support and be protected against new environmental requirements during the life of their agreement, perhaps as long as 10 years.

Participating farmers would also be certified through the new Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program, a seal of approval that could be used as a marketing tool and, eventually, on consumer products.

"The hope is that it would steer producers to meet consumer demand to be more responsible about water quality," said Deborah Swackhamer, an expert on water pollution at the University of Minnesota and a member of the EPA's scientific advisory panel.

Some voice skepticism

Already, however, the plan is generating sharp criticism from some conservation and water-quality advocates. They say 40 years of voluntary efforts have been insufficient to reduce farm runoff that dumps sediment, bacteria and other pollutants into Minnesota's rivers and streams. The state is only now starting to fulfill the requirements of the 1970s-era federal Clean Water Act in clearly identifying specific sources of water pollution across Minnesota's 81 watersheds.

Skeptics say the new plan would exempt farmers from specific requirements to reduce their contribution to overall runoff, creating an unfair burden for cities, sewage treatment plants and other landowners who will be asked to bear significant costs to achieve water-quality standards.

"It enshrines the old ways, defying all rationality," said Whitney Clark, executive director of Friends of the Mississippi, an environmental advocacy group.

Vilsack said Minnesota was chosen as the test site for a number of reasons. It's a big agricultural state -- half the state's land mass is controlled by farmers, who make up about 2 percent of the population.

It's also home of the headwaters of the Mississippi, a river with so much agricultural pollution that it's created a massive "dead zone" at its mouth in the Gulf of Mexico. The Dayton administration was eager to embrace the program, Vilsack said, and it fits with the state's strong conservation ethic.

Even more important for proving its effectiveness, Minnesota controls its own water-quality destiny. All the water that winds up in its thousands of lakes and rivers comes from the sky in the form of rain. Virtually all its water pollution comes from its farmers, businesses and residents.

"It's a great opportunity for Minnesota to help lead the way, and for us to use our financial and technical assistance to expand conservation," Vilsack said.

Funding would most likely be determined by the next federal farm bill, which Congress is expected to take up this year, Vilsack said. Already, congressional leaders have made it clear that the popular Conservation Reserve Program, in which farmers are paid to set aside environmentally sensitive land, will be cut, perhaps drastically. Other rules and funding for farm conservation may also be cut.

"We are obviously going to be challenged to have the resources to meet the needs in rural America, including investment in conservation," Vilsack said.

Dayton is expected to announce the signing of a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the EPA.

Integrated plan?

Environmental groups and other experts say the critical issue will be whether the program is incorporated with specific cleanup plans. For example, the state is just completing a massive analysis of pollution in the lower Mississippi River and Lake Pepin. Researchers have found that the sediment from the Minnesota River valley that is clouding the Mississippi and filling up Lake Pepin has increased tenfold in the last century -- largely as a result of heavily cultivated corn and soybeans replacing native prairie.

If the new program integrates farmers into a targeted cleanup plan for the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, it might work, Clark said. But if it simply protects farmers from having to make real changes to slow the loss of water and soil from their land, then it won't.

Others, however, say the certification program will be a significant improvement. Now, farmers are exempt from the Clean Water Act and most other environmental regulations. This program, which would combine support, subsidies and some certainty about the future, will encourage them to do more, Swackhamer said.

"It's a huge step in the right direction to get farmers engaged in the best management practices and to see how effective they are," she said. "There is a lot riding on this."

Pioneer Press
Minnesota gets lead role in pilot project to cut farm pollution
By Dennis Lien
Updated: 01/17/2012 04:16:19 PM CST

A new federal program that encourages farmers to adopt better land-use practices that cut pollution into rivers and lakes is getting a trial run in Minnesota.

The pilot project took its first step Tuesday when Gov. Mark Dayton, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson signed a memorandum of understanding at the State Capitol stating their intent to develop it here. The state will begin working out details as early as next week.

Under the program, participating farmers would pledge to manage their lands in ways that reduce soil erosion and cut fertilizer, pesticide and manure runoff. Approaches include adding buffers between fields and rivers, improving tillage techniques, and refining nutrient management plans.

In return, those farmers would be protected from new water-quality requirements for a projected 10 years and would get technical assistance and up to $10 million in financial help from the federal government.

"In this climate, I think that degree of certainty is of value to landowners and producers," Vilsack said.

By agreeing to and practicing yet-to-be-established conservation standards, farmers also would be certified by the state, opening the way to potential markets like those already available to state timber producers who use sustainable harvesting approaches.

"It emphasizes voluntary cooperation rather than rigid requirements," Dayton said.

Minnesota, which has almost

27 million acres of agricultural land, was given a lead role in part because the headwaters of three major watersheds are located here. The state also has a developed system of assessing and restoring lakes, rivers, and streams.

The program eventually could be broadened to include other states.

Environmental and conservation groups expressed skepticism about it.

"We have some pretty serious concerns about it," said Trevor Russell, watershed program director for Friends of the Mississippi River. "We hate to be naysayers, but if this were the health-care industry, this would be equivalent to telling hospitals that if they adhere to best-management practices they helped write, they would be exempt from public health laws for a decade."

Russell speculated the program is an effort by agricultural interests to avoid future restrictions.

"I think this is sort of their attempt to make sure the Clean Water Act isn't applied to agriculture for the next decade or so," Russell said.

Steve Morse, executive director of the Minnesota Environmental Partnership, agreed, adding that farmers essentially are being rewarded for doing what they already do or are supposed to do. Better, he said, to establish a cleanup plan that protects water quality and proceed from there.

"Why a 10-year safe haven from new standards and regulations?" he asked.

Farm groups, however, were enthusiastic backers.

"It's voluntary, and there's an incentive," said Doug Peterson, president of the Minnesota Farmers Union.

Warren Formo, executive director of the Minnesota Agricultural Water Resource Center, predicted the program will benefit farmers and will improve the environment. "I would remind folks that conservation pays," he said.

The state, along with farm, environmental, commodity and other interests, will start working out program guidelines soon, according to Minnesota Agriculture Commissioner Dave Frederickson. However, he said he could not predict when the program will be ready.

Pollution Control Agency Commissioner Paul Aasen said the technical committee will come up with established conservation practices that produce specific results.

"So the goal is to get this laundry list and to know, if we do this, we get that," Aasen said. "And then start to figure out who's willing to put this on their land and what that means for the water."

Participating state agencies include the Department of Agriculture, the PCA, the Board of Water and Soil Resources, and the Department of Natural Resources. Federal agencies include the agriculture department and the EPA.

KARE-TV
Land and water concerns lead to agricultural and environmental cooperation
Allen Costantini
January 17, 2011

ST. PAUL, Minn. -- Minnesota has become the test case of Agriculture and Environmental cooperation . Governor Mark Dayton, US Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and US Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" Tuesday at the State Capitol.

"There is a reason why Minnesota is the first state for this effort," said Vilsack. "It is because Minnesota has a history of producers who care deeply about the land and water."

Minnesotans have become increasingly concerned about the water quality in the state's lakes and rivers. Studies of Lake Pepin on the Mississippi have shown increasing levels of sediment believed deposited after being carried by farming efforts in the Minnesota River. Environmentalists often point to agriculture methods for contributing to pollution runoff.

Vilsack credited 95 percent of farmers in the upper Mississippi basin, including Minnesotans, with taking some conversation steps already. The new program is aimed at nudging farmers to more conservation measures. In return, farmers will not be included in any rule changes after they join the voluntary certification program.

"What Minnesota is going to do is they are going to create a certification program on a voluntary basis," explained Vilsack. They are going to bring producers and others to the table to help formulate that plan and then, we at the USDA will provide technical assistance and financial assistance."

Asked if the program was "compensation" for expected cuts in the farm budget, Vilsack disputed the concept of a "cut".

"It depends on how you define 'cut'. We have had circumstances were the 'cut' has actually been an increase in the overall funding, but not at the rate that the Farm Bill of 2008 called for," said Vilsack.

At any rate, state and federal officials admit setting up this initial Committee to draw up rules for the certifications will not be simple.

"The certification plan does not exist yet," said Vilsack. "It is going to be formulated by the folks from Minnesota."

Minnesota Agriculture Commissioner David Frederickson said "the devil is certainly in the details." He said he hopes to begin assembling the committee next week.

"There will be environmental organizations at the table. There will be farm organizations at the table. There will be commodity organizations at the table, conservation organizations at the table. So, I am just hopeful and have my fingers crossed that, at the end of the day, we will be able to make this happen."

The emphasis of the announcement on Tuesday was that the program is completely voluntary for farmers.

The Minnesota Farmers Union issued a written statement they are "pleased to work with USDA and EPA" on the new conservation program. In the statement, Union President Doug Peterson is quoted as saying the plan is a "perfect fit for us...regarding conservation practices."

How soon the Certification process would be up and functioning is not known.

KTTC-TV
Enhancing water quality in Minnesota
By Jonathan Kegges
January 17, 2011

ROCHESTER, Minn. (KTTC) -- The farm industry is one of main causes of water pollution in the state of Minnesota. Tuesday Governor Mark Dayton met with U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and the Environmental Protection Agency to try and enhance the water quality in Minnesota.

We all know how important our lakes and rivers are to the state of Minnesota and Tuesday a memorandum of understanding was signed to help improve water quality in the state.

This will be designed to accelerate progress toward water quality goals while also giving Minnesota Farmers greater regulatory and cost stability.

Participating farmers will be prioritized for cost-share funding from federal and state agencies reducing the uncertainties of their operating environment.

Farmers who implement and maintain approved conservation plans will be assured that their operations meet standards.

If Participating farmers meet program obligations they will not be required to implement additional water-quality practices.

Details of this program will be developed by state and federal regulatory agencies over the next few months.

Gov. Dayton signs agreement with federal officials on conservation
ECM Publishers Inc
by T.W. Budig
ECM Capitol reporter

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Lisa Jackson signed an agreement with Democratic Gov. Mark Dayton today (Jan. 17) to lend joint support to farmers seeking to improve their conservation practices.

“There is nothing but good news here,” said Vilsack, former governor of Iowa.

Dayton and the Obama Administration officials signed documents and shook hands to support a Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program.

The focus of the program is to quicken the pace conservation practices to safeguard water quality are put into practice on farms.

Farmers who voluntarily enroll into the certification program and practice conservation farming could be immune from future state environmental rule changes for a certain amount of time.

A technical advisory committee is envisioned as drawing up certification requirements.

“It's going to be a collective effort,” said Vilsack of establishing the requirements.

His department, said Vilsack, can provide technical expertise and funding — up to $10 million, a Dayton administration official indicated.

Vilsack noted that 95 percent of Minnesota farmers already use at least one conservation practice. But putting additional techniques into use could serve to magnify the benefits, he explained.

A major focus of her job is clean water, explained Jackson, and she realizes solutions for protecting water seep out on the local level.

Vilsack, introducing Jackson, portrayed her as well-informed and admiring of agriculture.

“She has seen with her eyes the stewardship of American agriculture,” he said.

Some Republican presidential candidates speak of eliminating the EPA.

The agreement Dayton and the Obama Administration officials signed is the first of its kind in the nation.

Steve Morse, executive director of the Minnesota Environmental Partnership, in a statement said the certification program is “very vague.”

“It does not provide the certainty that we need that our waters will become clean and healthy,” said Morse.

“There are no assurances that the practices farm operators adopt, when added together, will get the results Minnesotans expect,” he said.

Program details are expected to be established in upcoming months.

Some 27 million acres of land is Minnesota is agricultural.

Associated Press
Federal program to manage agricultural pollution to be tested; Minn. farmers could share $10M
January 17, 2011

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Minnesota farmers could share up to $10 million as part of a federal pilot program aimed at encouraging conservation and reducing agricultural pollution, officials said Tuesday.

Details on how the new program will work remain sketchy, including how money will get distributed and to whom. It's also unclear what conservation practices will qualify for the additional federal assistance.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, Environmental Protection Agency administrator Lisa Jackson and Gov. Mark Dayton announced the framework in St. Paul.

In essence, farmers would get special certification, technical assistance and government aid if they voluntarily agree to follow land management practices to soil erosion and runoff of fertilizers, pesticides and manure into streams and groundwater.

Vilsack said one incentive will be certainty because once the rules are set they won't change during the life of the agreements.

The guidelines will be developed by regulators in consultation with groups representing farmers, environmental interests and others.

Minnesota already has a high participation rate in conservation programs, but officials say efforts could be better pinpointed.

Paul Aasen, head of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, said the goal is to come up with a laundry list of conservation practices with proven results.

"If we do this, then we get that," he said.

Dayton administration officials said meetings with stakeholders could begin as soon as next week.

Minnesota Public Radio
New program to protect water quality still lacks detail
by Stephanie Hemphill
January 17, 2012

St. Paul, Minn. — Top officials from the Obama administration were in St. Paul today to announce a new program to encourage farmers to do more to protect water quality.

The program offers certification for farmers who conduct approved conservation practices, along with exemption from new regulations for participating farmers.

It's part of increased attention being paid to pollution problems in local waters, as well as in the Dead Zone of the Gulf of Mexico at the mouth of the Mississippi River

Both farmers and environmental activists express cautious optimism about how the new program could work.

In the ornate Governor's Reception Room at the State Capitol, the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency signed an agreement with Gov. Mark Dayton. It says the state and federal governments will collaborate to create the "Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program. It's an elaboration of existing voluntary farm conservation efforts that would provide additional incentives for farmers to keep field runoff out of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said 95 percent of farmers in the region already are doing some form of conservation work. A recent study shows progress, he said.

"We've quantified less soil erosion, less phosphorus, less nitrogen going into rivers and streams," Vilsack said. "We also know from this evaluation that if we can combine conservation techniques and technologies that we can have an even greater impact and effect."

With higher corn prices in recent years, farmers have cultivated more acres. Rain washes soil and fertilizers into rivers. In Minnesota, Lake Pepin is filling with sediment, and in the Gulf of Mexico, a dead zone the size of Connecticut forms each year when nitrogen and phosphorus wash in from the Mississippi River.

The new program aims to reduce that destructive flow. Details are not yet worked out, but the program will provide technical and financial help to any Minnesota farmer who wants to receive certification that they are taking measures to keep the water clean. In return, they would be sheltered from new environmental regulations for a period, possibly ten years.

Conservation practices include buffer strips along waterways, appropriate tillage, and careful management of nutrients and water inputs.

Warren Formo is already deep into this kind of work; he directs the Minnesota Agricultural Water Resources Center, an industry group that encourages research and shared information about water resources.

Farmers will welcome the new program as a way to refresh the sometimes combative conversation with environmental groups, Formo said

"If we can demonstrate to them this is a way we can show past progress and challenge to do even more, I think farmers will be interested in that conversation," Formo said. "If we can keep it as a positive, encouraging, challenging program, I think we'll attract a lot of farmers."

It is impossible to know at this point whether the program will or won't work, Formo said.

His caution is amplified by many environmentalists, who are downright skeptical.

The work done by farmers so far is rudimentary compared to what's needed, said Steve Morse, who directs the 80-member Minnesota Environmental Partnership.

"We're still scrambling around the two-yard line, counting inches, and we have 98 yards to go," Morse said. "Minnesotans expect ag to do its share to protect our water resources. So if there's certainty to producers, we have to have certainty that we're going to get cleaner water. That's not there."

Morse said a ten-year exemption from new regulations is too long. Cities and industry have their permits reviewed every five years, he said, and continual new information and technical improvements are made.

The first step will be to set up a technical advisory committee to hash out the details. Officials say it will include farmers, commodity groups, conservation experts, and environmentalists.

EPA administrator holds lecture in Coffman Union
Jackson discusses the role of science and technology in the EPA's work.
BY ZACHARY MCKEAGUE
01 / 18/ 2012

Coffman Union's theater was near capacity during Tuesday's visit from Lisa Jackson — U.S. Environmental Agency Administrator.

She was brought in by the Humphrey School of Public Affairs to connect with students in a public-style forum, Anne Mason, Humphrey's spokeswoman said.

Jackson's visit to the University of Minnesota preceded her meeting with Gov. Mark Dayton at the state Capitol to sign the nation's first agreement concerning farmers restricting agricultural pollutants running into rivers and lakes. Many of the students attended the event for this reason alone.

"Nonpoint source pollution from agriculture is one of the biggest issues we have with water quality," sophomore Michelle Angelroth said. "I was curious to see what she had to say."

Christina Newell, a senior sustainability and art student, came out because of her sheer enthusiasm over the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards — new EPA regulations that limit toxic emissions from power plants, including heavy metals such as mercury.

"I heard about the new mercury rule," she said, "and I'm pretty excited about that."

But Jackson's discussion at the University focused mostly on the role of science and technology in the "vital" work of the EPA.

"Science is the backbone of everything we do at the EPA," Jackson said. "We use science to set the standards."

The EPA, she said, is commonly misrepresented in news as an agency dealing only in climate change and endangered species.

"Most of what we do, day in, day out, is actually about the protection of one species: people," Jackson said.

She boasted of jobs created by EPA's efforts to transform polluted industrial areas into usable, clean commercial areas.

"The work happening [at the University] is going to be even more essential to the EPA's mission: to protect the American people," Jackson said.

After her monologue, Jackson took questions from the audience, which revolved around the University's and the state's ability to contribute to the EPA's mission.

Jackson said the answer is continued community involvement after graduation. College life promotes community living, and community living exposes people to greener living, she said.

"There is a little amnesia that happens," she said.

"When you walk out the [University] doors, or through the gates or with a diploma … don't forget these things."