

## **Millions of dollars in stimulus bill could aid Bay's restoration**

**Plant upgrades, restoration projects, energy measures and public transit funding would all benefit the Chesapeake**

By Karl Blankenship

The Chesapeake Bay region stands to gain hundreds of millions of dollars to help upgrade wastewater treatment plants, build wetlands, restore habitats and even improve fish passage from the massive \$787 billion stimulus bill approved by Congress in February.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which was largely praised by environmental groups across the country, provides tens of billions of dollars nationwide for conservation programs over the next two years, while providing billions more for programs that promote alternative energy and energy conservation as well as public transit.

"Congress really got it right with the economic recovery package that will deliver jobs and green infrastructure to America," said Wesley Warren, director of programs for the Natural Resources Defense Council. "The bill makes smart investments that will jump-start the economy, help sustain future growth and meet the challenges of the 21st century."

Although the exact amount of money available for Chesapeake restoration efforts is unknown, it will eclipse last year's Farm Bill, which is expected to steer more than \$400 million to the six states in the watershed over five years, as the largest slug of federal dollars to the Bay.

One area where the direct benefit to the region can be calculated-and one that illustrates the magnitude of funding in the legislation-is the EPA's Clean Water State Revolving Fund, which provides low-cost loans for activities such as upgrading wastewater treatment plants.

The fund is slated to get \$4 billion over the next two years. That compares with the roughly \$700 million a year that Congress has provided in recent years-and is in addition to those annual appropriations.

Under the formula used to distribute revolving loan fund money, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Federal Affairs Office has calculated that the stimulus will provide an additional \$878 million for the Bay states. That included \$19.6 million for Delaware; \$19.6 million for the District of Columbia; \$96.5 million for Maryland; \$440 million for New York; \$158 million for Pennsylvania; \$81.7 million for Virginia; and \$62.2 million for West Virginia.

Because of new Chesapeake Bay nutrient reduction regulations, many treatment plants throughout the watershed already have upgrade plans in the works. The legislation also contains provisions making it easier to subsidize loans for financially strained communities. That could help some areas of the watershed where the new regulations have proved to be especially burdensome.

Also, at least 20 percent of the funds are to be used for water improvement projects involving green infrastructure, stormwater runoff mitigation and innovative programs.

Bay projects may benefit additionally because the legislation contains a provision allowing the EPA to reallocate unused funds to its environment programs account. The Bay benefits from several other grant programs funded through that account.

"If we're going to do something about the deplorable condition of the Bay, the federal government is really

going to have to step up in a way it hasn't up until now," said Doug Siglin, who heads CBF's Federal Affairs Office. "It is tremendously important in this economic climate to get this money."

But he and others noted that the funding is a drop in the bucket compared to overall water infrastructure needs, which are estimated at \$300 billion and \$500 billion nationwide over the next two decades

"This stimulus bill is a tremendous first step, and there is a lot of money in it that is going to be useful in reducing the pollution in the Bay, but it's still not sufficient," Siglin said.

And, he cautioned, money alone will not solve all of the Bay's problems. "What we are going to need is a new approach that may in fact be more regulatory in nature," he said. "EPA is still going to have to find a way to ensure that all of us in the watershed take the actions that we need to take so that collectively we are going to get to the end goal."

Other parts of the bill make funds available to nationwide programs that support a variety of conservation and habitat restoration efforts—some funds are even slated for dam removals and fish passages. A portion of that money would be expected to be used in the Bay watershed.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Water and Waste Disposal Program will get \$1.38 billion to provide loans, loan guarantees and grants for water, sewer, stormwater and solid waste disposal facilities in cities and towns with fewer than 10,000 people and other rural areas.

The U.S. Geological Survey, which plays a major role in research and water quality monitoring throughout the Bay watershed, will get \$140 million to support research and a wide variety of repair and construction for facilities, including its extensive streamgauge network.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which supports a variety of research and habitat restoration activities around the Bay, will get \$230 million for operations and to address a backlog of research and restoration activities.

The legislation targets \$290 million for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program to be directed toward projects that provide the greatest public safety, flood protection, and economic and environmental benefits. Half of the funds are to be used for purchasing and restoring floodplain easements.

The Army Corps of Engineers will get \$2 billion for construction, of which at least \$200 million will be set aside for water-related environmental construction. The Corps has been involved in a host of Bay activities, from the rebuilding of Poplar Island and shoreline stabilization efforts to large-scale underwater grass and oyster restoration projects.

Also, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will get \$280 million for refuge operations and maintenance and \$165 million for resource management, which can include its habitat restoration programs.

Other programs that may pay dividends for Bay restoration include \$8.4 billion for mass transit programs; \$5 billion to help weatherize homes; \$4.5 billion to "green" federal buildings; \$6 billion for renewable energy; and a variety of programs that promote energy efficiency.

Besides traditional transit, the legislation contains \$8 billion to support the construction of high-speed rail and intercity passenger service around the nation. In addition, Amtrak will get \$1.3 billion, much of which is slated for capital improvements along its Northeast Corridor, which operates between Washington and Boston.

**Karl is the Editor of the Bay Journal.**

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