

Turning the Tide on the Chesapeake

The landmark Clean Water Act, a promise that our nation's waters would be fishable and fit for swimming within two decades, was signed by President Richard M. Nixon in 1972. It was a visionary move. At the time, the Chesapeake Bay's health was declining: Its waters were polluted, there were frequent fish kills, and the underwater grasses necessary for much of its balanced system had disappeared. Nixon's action encouraged me and others to do something about it.

On a five-day trip around the bay the following year—30 years ago last month—I heard about the bay's ills firsthand from many people who lived or worked near or on its waters. The next year, I talked to scientists and policymakers, and it became clear that to help the Chesapeake we first would need a scientific study to identify its problems and then a com-

mission made up of representatives from the states bordering the bay to implement solutions.

My proposal authorizing a major study of the Chesapeake won bipartisan support and passed Congress easily. In 1983 the results of the scientific study were presented to a new coordinating commission at a historic conference attended by the chief elected officials of the states surrounding the bay. The pattern set then—scientific study underpinning coordinated decisions and policies for the bay's protection and restoration—remains today in the form of the Chesapeake Bay Program. This program got its start 20 years ago under President Ronald Reagan, who called the Chesapeake "a national treasure."

As a result of the Chesapeake Bay Program we now have more rockfish, and we are beginning to see more underwater grasses. We also have held our ground against the counter-current of population growth, but other progress has been limited.

Water-monitoring data reveal that the bay water is no better today than it was 20 years ago. We do not have the rich sea life that Maryland history records. We are at a critical moment at which the Chesapeake, under pressure from increasing population, could become healthier or regress into sickness.

It is not that we do not know how to succeed—we do. Scientists and policymakers have a clear plan for the Chesapeake. But it is easier to put a "Save the Bay" bumper sticker on the car than to provide the resources necessary to do the job.

I have confidence in the congressional delegations from Maryland and Virginia, which have shown their loyalty and commitment to the bay. We must continue to welcome candidates who know the Chesapeake's problems and pledge to solve them.

But we also will need leadership from executive branches throughout the watershed. After all, governors, county executives and heads of federal agencies

have the day-to-day responsibilities of protecting and restoring the Chesapeake Bay.

For a long time, compliance with the bay program has been almost entirely voluntary. The alternative is regulation, such as the requirement that municipalities treat their sewage, or that cars be equipped with catalytic converters. Regulations attach the real costs of pollution to the activities that produce it. We may have to add this tool more forcefully to our effort to save the bay.

We need a recommitment to the bay today that is every bit as vital as the scientific study and the forum for policy decisions were in the '70s and '80s. We must take action now to save the Chesapeake.

—Charles McC. Mathias

a Republican, represented Maryland in the U.S. Senate from 1968 to 1987.