Water Matters – October 2009
Chesapeake Watershed Forum

Documentary filmmaker Hedrick Smith recently addressed the audience gathered for the Chesapeake Watershed Forum in Shepherdstown, West Virginia and urged action.

"You cannot afford to ignore the environment. It is having an effect right now on your health and on your children's health – men have lower sperm counts, women are getting breast cancer, children are being born with congenital birth defects – [because chemicals are getting into our drinking water]."

He pointed out that pollution is not nearly as visible as it was in the early 1970's when the polluted Cuyahoga River caught fire and mobilized society to urge the creation of the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act and the first Earth Day celebrations. But, he said, we are seeing the effects of water pollution: Fish in the Shenandoah River are being found with intersex traits, widespread fish kills have occurred in Virginia and 'dead zones' in the Chesapeake Bay sound the alarm bell that our actions are having harmful effects on the environment.

"It is time to stop pointing fingers", he said. We all live in a watershed and we all contribute to the pollution. Detergents, cleaners, lubricants, fuels, cleaning products, lawn products, all these contain endocrine disruptors which are theorized to be linked to the intersex traits in fish in the Shenandoah and occurrences of frogs being born with up to six legs.

"This is long-term slow-motion risk," Mr. Smith said. "We don't know what the safe levels are - what we used to think was safe we're finding out is not."

Over 200 members of watershed groups, land trusts, private foundations, local and state agencies gathered to discuss the current status of environmental issues in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Sessions focused on the upcoming Bay total maximum daily load (TMDL), the executive order on the Bay, sustainable agriculture, getting ahead of climate change, conservation design and other presentations related to natural resources.

This third annual Forum was organized by the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, a regional non-profit organization which focuses on bringing diverse groups together to help restore and protect the Bay and its rivers.

In each session, participants listened intently to presenters together information and applying it to their local organizations and watersheds. At the breaks, conversations continued out into the halls, gathering other listeners who joined in to discuss their local issues, successes and challenges. In each session, the dedication and passion of those working to protect water quality – yet balance the protection of agriculture, private property rights and funding - was very noticeable.
Most agreed that addressing the health of the Bay and our local rivers is a very daunting challenge. Groups representing the Shenandoah Valley and other headwater areas strive to protect their local water quality which, in turn, helps the Bay.

The Bay total maximum daily load (TMDL), required by law, is the largest and most complex study yet. The implementation plan covers six states, 483 significant point source discharges, tens of thousands of farms and 16 million citizens. But the Environmental Protection Agency is using a new approach to restoration of the Bay with two year milestones and increased performance accountability. We will delve further into the Bay TMDL in a future Water Matters article.

“We are not going to save the Bay by regulations alone,” said Chuck Fox of the EPA, echoing Hedrick Smith’s sentiment that it is going to require everyone working together.

This is the nineteenth article in a series addressing Page County’s Water Resources and was written by Chris Anderson, Page County Environmental Coordinator. For more information on the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, go to www.acb-online.org or stop by the Department of Environmental Services located at 101 South Court Street, Luray.