Large Farms Help to Reduce Agriculture's Contribution to Phosphorus Runoff

Green Bay, Wisconsin --- Congressman Reid Ribble was clear that the phosphorus summit he recently organized was meant to move beyond finger pointing and towards collaborative solutions. "Unfortunately, subsequent media reports have been more than happy to point fingers at agriculture, especially large dairies," said Laurie Fischer, the DBA’s Director of Dairy Policy. "This is simply not fair." The summit featured the owners of two large dairies who shared the many steps they are already taking to reduce the possibility of phosphorus runoff.

Even if 45.7% of the phosphorus load in the Lower Fox River comes from agriculture, no distinctions are made between type and size of the contributing farms. Agriculture is the primary land use in the watershed, so it makes sense it would contribute a significant portion of the phosphorus. It is far more concerning that urban areas, which cover just 27 percent of the watershed’s land, contribute the majority of the phosphorus.

Larger dairies that have at least 700 cows (these operations are called CAFOs) are already the most heavily regulated farms, and are among the most innovative in how they store, treat, and apply manure. All CAFOs are subject to permits that require them to have zero discharge, which means that they are not allowed to discharge any phosphorus from their production sites. Smaller farms are not held to this standard.

CAFOs must account for all of the manure they produce, including how it is applied. This is done by preparing detailed Nutrient Management Plans (NMPs). We know that these plans work. In 2010, government regulators surveyed the phosphorus index on Brown County farmland with NMPs and found that less than 0.1 percent of this land exceeded DNR standards.

Media reports have focused on the increase in cattle in Brown and Kewaunee County. The inclusion of Kewaunee County is perplexing since it has a very little Green Bay shoreline, and almost all of its rivers and streams drain to Lake Michigan. Four of our 72 counties did have an increase in dairy cow numbers, but only two of those counties are in the Fox-Wolf Watershed. The modest increases in dairy cows in those counties (7.4 percent in Brown and 3.4 percent in Fond du Lac) are more than offset by the massive declines elsewhere in the watershed.

The summit’s closing speaker was Tom Sigsmund, the Executive Director of NEW Water. His presentation was focused on NEW Water’s desire to partner with others for meaningful solutions. More finger pointing will undermine efforts to reach out to agricultural producers to form the type of partnerships needed for adaptive management, phosphorus trading, and an overall reduction in the bay’s phosphorus load.
"We would benefit if all farms were held to the standards that CAFOs must already follow, but finding the funding to help smaller farms reach that level will be hard," explained Fischer. "Phosphorus trading provides an opportunity, but only if farmers and point sources are willing to trust one another and work together. This is why the tone of the public discourse on this issue is not helpful, in fact, it is counterproductive."

About DBA
The Dairy Business Association is an industry organization comprised of dairy producers, corporate as well as allied industry supporters. DBA promotes the growth and success of all dairy farms in Wisconsin by fostering a positive business and political environment. For more information about DBA, please visit our website at www.widba.com.

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