

# Clean Water Partnerships accelerate conservation efforts



By Jenna Mitchell

As we near the 2025 Chesapeake Bay pollution reduction goal deadline, it is clear that partnerships are imperative to our success, as no one entity is capable of reaching these goals alone.

One Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay partnership has grown tremendously in recent years, with hopes of paving the way for the future of the agricultural industry in the Bay watershed. The Turkey Hill Clean Water Partnership, comprising Turkey Hill Dairy, the Alliance, and Maryland & Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative Association has experienced rapid success in supporting farmers supplying Turkey Hill Dairy with conservation action.

The partnership began in 2018 at the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay's Businesses for the Bay Forum, which urged companies to consider how they could change their operations to improve water quality. Conversations between the Alliance and the dairy led to the Turkey Hill Clean Water Partnership.

This collaboration, the first of its kind in the region — and perhaps the country — has Turkey Hill fully committed to building conservation into its supply chain. The business is the largest dairy distributor in Lancaster County, PA. Because the dairy has one of the largest ecological footprints in the county, it and the Alliance conceptualized a partnership that focused on Turkey Hill farmers taking meaningful steps to improve local water quality. The MDVA cooperative plays an important role in the partnership, as they are Turkey Hill's sole dairy provider.

Through the partnership, the dairy is requiring all of its milk suppliers to obtain and implement a conservation plan, a tool designed to help better manage the resources on farms. This commitment, which has been officially written into Turkey Hill's contract with the MDVA cooperative, is more than just a requirement, it's an incentive. Turkey Hill has opted for a "carrot



Cows line up for a group photo on a Lancaster County, PA, farm. Turkey Hill Dairy, the largest dairy distributor in the county, is requiring all of its milk suppliers to obtain and implement a conservation plan. (Maryland Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative)

and stick" approach, with the Alliance and the MDVA cooperative supporting their farmers in achieving this new standard.

To date, the partnership has covered 100% of the cost of writing conservation plans for 24 farms; installed 14 structural agricultural best management practices, such as manure storage facilities, heavy use area protection and barnyard stabilization.

Participating farmers' current conservation level and future goals have been assessed. Farmers have been supported with more than \$3 million in funding through various sources, including: National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Services, PennVest, and Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

Farmers have been truly appreciative of the support offered by the Turkey Hill Clean Water Partnership. "Working together with the partnership has allowed our farm to design and complete many improvements to our operation," said Chris Landis of Worth the Wait Farms in Lancaster County. "This has impacted our operation by allowing us to manage our livestock and cropping in a responsible manner leading us to implement the best conservation practices that we can to ensure a sustainable future for

generations to come."

The Alliance was recently awarded an additional \$500,000 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Small Watersheds Grant program to continue its support of dairy farmers. Much work still needs to be done. The partnership roughly estimates that \$20 million is needed to fully bring partnership producers up to the new conservation standard. The partnership is continuing to seek funding sources to complete this work.

Besides setting sustainable goals for the farmers supplying Turkey Hill, the partnership also provides a model for the entire dairy industry. "The hands-on approach of working alongside each producer is important to not only Turkey Hill, but to the dairy industry overall, as it can accelerate conservation action and motivate more businesses to take a similar approach," said Turkey Hill's CEO, Tim Hopkins.

From its inception, the partnership was built for replication. This project began with an NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant with the goal of demonstrating that leadership within the private sector can accelerate conservation action. In fact, the Alliance hoped from the beginning that the example the partnership sets would motivate additional businesses to take a similar approach in improving their operations'

impact on local rivers and streams. As the partnership has grown, participants have put significant energy into making the effort scalable and replicable. Thanks to this model, the Alliance and the MDVA cooperative are in discussion with two other large corporations about similar efforts. These major food companies receive milk from hundreds of farmers and have significant potential water quality impacts on agricultural lands throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Additionally, as a result of partnering with Turkey Hill and the Alliance, the MDVA cooperative has developed the goal of becoming the first dairy cooperative association to support all of its member farms in achieving full compliance with conservation standards. The MDVA cooperative is evolving their structure and mission to accomplish this ambitious goal. In response to its commitment to the partnership, the MDVA cooperative has quadrupled their sustainability workforce. It has also made it an expressed objective to develop and support the sustainability goals of their clients, even in an economic climate that may otherwise be difficult for many dairy farmers.

"We have seen tremendous success through our partnership with Turkey Hill Dairy and the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay," said Lindsay Reames, director of sustainability and external relations for the MDVA cooperative. "Our focus now is to find revenue streams to support our ongoing work and the projects our members need help implementing. Whether it's creating an updated nutrient management plan or providing cost-share support for the construction of a new manure storage facility, the Turkey Hill Clean Water Partnership is doing good things for our farmers, our customers, our communities and our streams — and we want to keep that forward momentum going."

The Alliance will continue to work with the MDVA cooperative, Turkey Hill Dairy and others to further refine the partnership model by increasing its scale and replicability. In time, the partnership says that it believes that this approach to conservation will change the market itself and become a standard operating procedure within the agricultural industry. ■

*Steward's Corner is a column from the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay. Jenna Mitchell is the Pennsylvania state director for the Alliance.*