

Abstract

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Reforming Nonpoint Pollution Policy: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Agricultural nonpoint pollution has been recognized as an important cause of water quality problems in the United States for at least 30 years. Though the problems are pervasive, agriculture's role in water quality degradation is particularly important in some of the nation's most important water resources (the Chesapeake Bay, the Gulf of Mexico, and Pamlico Sound) where nutrients and sediment from agricultural lands have damaged major fisheries and ecosystems.

Point source pollution from agriculture, primarily from large confined animal operations, has been subject to the same types of Federal regulations as industrial and municipal point sources. Nonpoint pollution from agriculture, which is by far more important in terms of water quality impacts, has been approached differently, through an array of local, state, and federal initiatives that emphasize voluntary adoption of pollution control practices encouraged by subsidies. Tens of billions of dollars have been spent. While improvements have occurred in some water quality metrics in some watersheds, there has been deterioration in others and, more generally, outcomes fall far short of what is needed to achieve established water quality goals. Existing policies are not achieving needed water quality improvements from agriculture, nor making the most of the resources devoted to water quality protection.

This lecture will explore reforms that would enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of policies for controlling water pollution from agriculture. It will describe a set of essential requirements if policy could be designed on a clean sheet and contrast this with historical approaches. Political considerations and institutional inertia make a clean start unlikely. Reforms that can improve effectiveness and efficiency when some of the efficiency- and effectiveness-mitigating features of the current policy environment must be retained are presented.