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5 things government leaders can do to save the Susquehanna River and the Chesapeake Bay

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The Chesapeake Bay watershed encompasses 64,000 square miles in six states. The sources of pollution — mostly excess nitrogen and phosphorus — are scattered throughout those thousands of square miles, from antiquated wastewater treatment systems, to mine drainage in Pennsylvania's coal region, to the thousands of miles of streams that pass through farmland and urban and suburban development.

More: Killing the Chesapeake: Special report on how the Susquehanna River harms the bay coming Feb. 3

Here is what needs to be done:

Upgrade sewage systems

Wastewater and stormwater collection systems contribute to raw sewage flowing into the streams and rivers of the watershed. One egregious example is Harrisburg's system, which during heavy rains causes the system to overflow and spew sewage into the Susquehanna River.

More: Raw sewage in the Susquehanna: Pa. 'state government is basically defecating in the river'

Yet, according to Environmental Integrity Project, many small towns and cities in the watershed have similar combined sewage and stormwater systems and require large-scale infrastructure projects to remediate them.

Change how we farm

Much of the pollution that winds up in the bay originates in the fertile farmland upstream, flowing down the Susquehanna from Pennsylvania. A number of simple things can mitigate that, according to environmentalists.

Farm practices — how fields are tilled and crops managed — can be altered to reduce runoff into streams and creeks.

Farmers can fence off wetlands and streams to keep cattle from excreting waste into the watershed.

Farmers can reduce the number of areas they cultivate to provide natural buffers between fields and streams.

More: How Amish farming practices, old mill dams harm the Susquehanna & Chesapeake — and how to fix it

Plant more trees

Planting trees along creeks as "riparian buffers" reduces the amount of runoff that can flow from the watershed. In addition, planting grasses and native plants creates a kind of natural water treatment system that filters toxins and excess nutrients from runoff.

Creating green spaces in urban areas can help manage stormwater runoff from paved surfaces. The Keystone 10 Million Trees Partnership is working to plant 10 million new trees in priority landscapes in Pennsylvania by the end of 2025.

Protect the fish

Eels in the Susquehanna River help transport fresh water mussels that act as small filtration devices, combing out toxins from the water. Restoring the eel populations by removing barriers such as dams that prevent them from migrating upstream will assist in cleaning up the watershed.

More: Dammed, drugged & poisoned: 3 iconic Susquehanna species struggle to survive

Spend more on watershed projects

Pennsylvania is \$324 million behind in funding to meet the bay Clean Water Blueprint.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation has sued the EPA for failing to require Pennsylvania (and, to a lesser extent, New York) to adequately fund restoration projects.

It won't be easy for the Keystone State to find that money, especially as the pandemic ravages the state budget, but it must be done to prevent Pennsylvania's Susquehanna River from killing the Chesapeake.

More: 8 simple things YOU can do to restore the Susquehanna River and save the Chesapeake Bay

More: Pennsylvania is failing the Chesapeake Bay — here's how that affects you

Sources: The Nature Conservancy and Chesapeake Bay Foundation