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## WRAS Program gets underway

St. Mary's City - St. Mary's College of Maryland officials announced late last month that they have received more than \$78,000 in grant funds from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. This was welcome news by the more than 40 local residents and agency officials who attended the St. Mary's River Watershed Restoration Action Strategy (WRAS) kick-off meeting on May 12. The grant monies, \$78,315 in all, will be used to develop a scientific characterization of the tidal and non-tidal streams within the St. Mary's River watershed.



A WRAS is a short, comprehensive natural resource-based prioritized action plan that states specific goals, objectives, and commitments to guide actions of the public, watershed organizations, land trusts, and government to preserve and restore habitat and water quality in a watershed. The WRAS will point out specific areas, issues, and actions that can result in measurable environmental improvements in the watershed. The first step in developing the WRAS is to bring together all existing study data relating to natural resources and quality of life and then to update this information. This first phase, referred to as the "characterization" of the watershed is currently underway. The WRAS program is required under the Clean Water Act. Through the leadership of the St. Mary's River Watershed Association, St. Mary's County will be at the forefront in gaining compliance with federal laws thereby establishing us as leaders in watershed planning and restoration in Maryland. This will give St. Mary's County an advantage over others in seeking public and private funding for watershed restoration projects.

Many government-financed and -supported programs have their critics, and this WRAS program is no exception. Some local residents declined to allow workers to survey streams located on their private property, and of course their wishes have been respected. This will have little impact on the overall assessment of the waterways. However, for every person who has come forward with concerns, we have had several more call or email and offer support for the WRAS program. One concern voiced was that as a result of the WRAS, homeowners would be forced into strict compliance with environmental laws, into the greening of their properties, and into fines and restoration expenses which they cannot afford. This emphatically is not the case. While the WRAS documents and process will be completely transparent and an open public

process, no part of the WRAS program will be enforcement related. This is not to say that enforcement officials will be barred from accessing WRAS documents - it is an open process.

The St. Mary's River Watershed Association and its partners will not condone legal enforcement against property owners as a part of the WRAS. Instead, areas of concern noted on private property will be prioritized for action, followed by identification of funding for restoration. Only then will property owners be asked to engage with us to find win-win solutions that will foster greater environmental protections, thus leading to an enhanced quality of life in the St. Mary's River watershed. In most cases, we believe that restoration projects will be entirely financed through government grants, foundation and trust grants, and Association membership dues.

The WRAS program will launch a web site this summer: [www.StMarysRiverPlanning.com](http://www.StMarysRiverPlanning.com). The web site will be the first step in making this WRAS program transparent and will allow the public to participate in its completion.

The WRAS program funding partners include: St. Mary's River Watershed Association, St. Mary's County Government, St. Mary's College of Maryland, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Maryland Dept. of Natural Resources, Liberty Homes - Glazed Pines, Eagan McAllister Associates, and a Chesapeake Bay Trust Stewardship Grant. Additional sponsors and funding sources are needed.

For more information, please contact us at [SMwatershed@yahoo.com](mailto:SMwatershed@yahoo.com).