Almost 300 million chickens are raised on Maryland's Eastern Shore poultry farms. At an average of three and a half pounds per chicken per year, that adds up to a lot of chicken waste – about a billion pounds or more, a lot of which allegedly ends up in the Chesapeake Bay.

Chicken manure contains high levels of phosphorus, nitrogen and other detrimental elements such as arsenic and various heavy metals. According to environmental groups such as Waterkeeper Alliance and Waterkeepers Chesapeake, when it rains, this chicken manure along with the harmful chemicals ends up in the Bay.

Many agree that agricultural runoff is the single largest source of pollution in the bay.

However, according to environmentalists, the state agency responsible for managing the chicken effluent, Maryland's Department of Agriculture is covering polluter's tracks.

Waterkeepers Alliance alleges that MDA “refuses to allow public access to the operational plans that detail how chicken farms dispose of their waste. No one actually knows where all this poop is going, except for factory farm operators, their bosses at large integrators such as Perdue, Tyson and Montaire, and a few privileged state bureaucrats.”

The group further alleges that, “Maryland’s policy of keeping factory farm pollution a state secret poses a huge obstacle to citizen efforts to hold poultry operations accountable for water pollution. And federal requirements are little help. Federal law requires that large-scale factory farms operate under a Clean Water Act permit. Theoretically, these permits should detail waste plans and be available to the public. Unfortunately, in clear defiance of federal law, the State of Maryland has not required that these large operations obtain permits.”

Waterkeepers Alliance is currently seeking to have the books open to the public through litigation. Similar litigation efforts have been successful in a case where Delaware Riverkeeper sued the State of New York to gain access to pollution records for New York farms that were affecting Delaware waterways.

Recently, federal courts have ruled that farm waste management plans must be opened to the public for review.

A recent PBS documentary profiled the waste handling techniques of Eastern Shore chicken farms where filmmaker's cameras documented chicken farms in tidal low lands spreading manure across fields over drainage pipes and ditches. These same areas are affected by rising and setting tides allowing effluent chemicals to be washed out into the bay. Evidence on film was shown of tackle boxes floating in ditches and dead minnows floating in pipes and ditches after the tide receded.

Still in the public comment stages are new regulations being proposed by the Maryland Department of the Environment that would begin the process of holding polluters responsible to the tune of fines up to $10,000 per day for those found to be violating pollution control requirements.

The regulations call for chicken farmers to apply for state permits and follow strict environmental guidelines. The measure also calls for MDE to have the ability to inspect farms, chicken houses, and take water samples to ensure compliance.