Annapolis, MD – The Maryland Department of Agriculture today announced that based on statewide soil test information 82 percent of farm fields tested to date will not be impacted by new environmental regulations, which may limit phosphorus application or the use of animal manure as a fertilizer. Eighteen percent of farm fields will require use of the phosphorus management tools to evaluate risk. Only 1 percent of all farm fields are immediately banned from applying phosphorus crop fertilizer. The phosphorous in poultry and dairy manure will impact its use as a crop nutrient in these situations.

“We are pleased that we finally have real, accurate soil phosphorus data from cropland across the state and not estimates or formulas based on modeling scenarios. In the long term, this data, which will be regularly collected, will enable the department to track progress as farmers implement the PMT and additional best management practices on their farms,” said Agriculture Secretary Joe Bartenfelder. “This data collection will also guide the department to ensure we have the resources needed to provide financial and technical support for farmers to implement the PMT.”

The Phosphorus Management Tool (PMT) is an updated tool that uses the latest scientific findings to identify the potential risk of phosphorus loss from farm fields and prevent the additional buildup of phosphorus in soils that are already saturated. Farms that are over certain thresholds must utilize the PMT to evaluate risk and determine if they are limited in how much phosphorous can be applied to their fields. The PMT regulations are being phased in over several years to give farmers time to modify their management practices. High soil phosphorus levels are more likely to occur on fields where manure or poultry litter has been applied as a crop nutrient over an extended period. The PMT regulations went into effect June 2015 and are part of the state’s Watershed Implementation Plan to restore the Chesapeake Bay, as required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The data is based on analysis from 875,622 acres compiled to date throughout the state and show 82 percent of farmland in Maryland has soil phosphorus levels that fall below PMT thresholds. These fields, according to soil tests, have a Fertility Index Value under 150. Poultry litter and dairy manure can be applied as fertilizer to these fields in accordance with Maryland’s nutrient management regulations. The acreage reported to date represents about 70 percent of farmland required to submit soil phosphorus data to the department.

“The soil test data submission is a new requirement of the department resulting from the Phosphorus Management Tool regulations,” said Assistant Secretary for Resource Conservation Hans Schmidt. “The department is contacting those who have not submitted data so we can have a complete picture of soil health in Maryland.”

While 18 percent of farmland is impacted by the PMT regulations, most farm fields are not at risk for phosphorus loss and may still benefit from manure as a crop fertilizer. Two thirds of farm fields on the Lower Eastern Shore have soil phosphorus levels that will require use of PMT and 11 percent or 8,700 acres on the Lower Eastern Shore are restricted from any phosphorus application. However, every region in Maryland has at least a few hundred farm acres with soil phosphorus levels over 500 FIV – prohibiting further phosphorus application.

The following summarizes the Soil Phosphorus Fertility Index Value (FIV) statewide data results compiled to date from Maryland farmland:

- FIV less than 150: 82 percent (714,162 acres) – These fields are not required to run PMT.
- FIV 150-299: 13 percent (115,557 acres)
- FIV 300-450: 4 percent (30,683 acres)
- FIV 450-499: 0.6 percent (4,780 acres)
- FIV greater than 500: 1.2 percent (10,441 acres) – These fields are banned from applying phosphorus.

The PMT economic impact study conducted by Salisbury University in 2014 used information provided by the Maryland Department of Agriculture that was based on University of Maryland comparisons of the original risk management tool (the Phosphorus Site Index) with the PMT. The university information was based on 391 data points and projected a percent change in high risk fields by region. The department assumed all manure available in a county was applied to cropland in that county, a worst case scenario. Using the manure available in each county multiplied by the percent of estimated change in FIV level for that county, 228,000 tons of poultry litter were projected to require alternative management. The data released today reflects nearly 57,000 farm field soil samples statewide and gives a more accurate picture of soil phosphorus fertility index levels in Maryland. Soil samples must be no older than three years and some farmers and consultants are currently in the process of updating information by collecting and analyzing soil samples to update farm nutrient management plans.

For more information on the Phosphorus Management Tool, visit www.mda.maryland.gov/pmt.

Click here for a chart of soil phosphorus levels by region. A spreadsheet of FIV levels broken down by county is available here.

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