

A political divide over the environment

Brown, Hogan disagree on how to address Chesapeake pollution

By Timothy B. Wheeler, The Baltimore Sun

6:09 p.m. EDT, September 26, 2014

To hear [Larry Hogan](#) tell it, the multibillion-dollar effort to clean up the Chesapeake Bay has been a dismal failure — and the biggest problem is getting Pennsylvania and New York to stop sending sediment pollution down the Susquehanna River.

The Republican gubernatorial candidate vows to "stand up" for Maryland farmers, watermen and homeowners, who he contends have been unfairly burdened with the bay's restoration, and says he'd take the other states to court if necessary to get them to do more.

His Democratic opponent, [Anthony Brown](#) — and most scientists — say it's more complicated than that. They say Maryland needs to reduce homegrown pollution of its rivers and streams to help the bay.

In electing Maryland's next governor this fall, voters will be choosing whether to stay the course on restoring the Chesapeake or take it in a very different direction. They also could be deciding if hydraulic fracturing for natural gas will go forward in Western Maryland, and if electric utility customers will keep paying a little more to put wind turbines and solar energy panels across the state.

Brown basically stands by the green initiatives of Gov. [Martin O'Malley](#), under whom he's served the past eight years as lieutenant governor. He vows to pursue "environmental justice" for all Marylanders, promote renewable energy to curb climate change and work to reduce pollution from sewage plants, urban runoff and farms.

Hogan contends that the O'Malley administration has botched the bay restoration, saddling Marylanders with fees and regulations while ignoring pollution pouring into the Chesapeake from out of state.

"I think the biggest threat to the bay is the policies of Anthony Brown and Martin O'Malley," Hogan said in an interview.

The environment rarely is a big issue in any election, though candidates of both parties pay lip service to the bay. Environmental groups routinely back Democratic candidates, and this election is no different. Brown has picked up a series of endorsements from activists fearful Hogan would cut funding and shelve programs they believe are helping.

Republicans often cede the votes of ardent environmentalists, but Hogan has challenged Brown's green credentials, accusing the O'Malley administration of neglecting Susquehanna pollution and "raiding" more than \$1 billion in funds earmarked for land preservation and sewage treatment.

"I've been in the state since 1986, and I don't remember the bay being an issue, at least in this way," says Donald F. Norris, chairman of the public policy department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He said it's unusual as well to hear a conservative Republican candidate argue that he'd do a better job cleaning up the bay.

Hogan stresses the threat to the bay from sediment piled up behind Conowingo Dam in the Susquehanna. The Republican promises to press the dam's owner, Exelon Corp., and the federal government to dredge out the muck, which can kill underwater vegetation and smother oysters. He also vows to push upriver states to stop letting mud and silt wash down the river, which he calls the bay's most overlooked problem.

As the bay's biggest tributary, the Susquehanna dumps more sediment into the Chesapeake than any other river. Tens of millions of pollution-laden tons have built up behind the dam, where they add to the bay's problems when storm-driven floods stir it up. But recent research suggests that the Susquehanna is responsible for less of the bay's sediment problems than once thought. A key study found the dam contributed only a fifth of the sediment that turned the upper bay into a murky mess after [Tropical Storm Lee](#) in 2011, the second-worst deluge to hit the region in 40 years.

"It isn't the drop-dead problem that some people would imagine," said Donald F. Boesch, president of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science.

More important, say Boesch and other scientists, the bay's biggest problem is nutrient pollution, not sediment. Nitrogen and phosphorus from sewage plants, farm and urban runoff, and other sources feed the algae blooms and dead zones hurting fish, crabs and shellfish. And while the Susquehanna contributes a large share of those nutrients, the water quality in much of Maryland's portion of the bay and in the state's rivers is hurt more by locally generated pollution, not what's coming from Pennsylvania and New York, scientists say.

Another Hogan pledge is to try to repeal the "rain tax," the stormwater pollution cleanup fees that the state required Baltimore City and Maryland's nine largest counties to charge. Hogan also says he'd hold off imposing any new regulations meant to reduce polluted runoff from farm fields, saying he believes they'd hurt farming and the poultry industry on the Eastern Shore.

"Quite frankly, I think farmers and watermen and homeowners have done their fair share, and continue to do so," he said.

Brown counters that state officials have been "actively involved" in discussions with Exelon and with federal officials over the sediment buildup behind the Conowingo dam. But like most environmentalists and scientists, he argues that Hogan's exaggerating the significance of the dam and of sediment washing down the Susquehanna.

The Democrat maintains that cleaning up the bay requires a multipronged effort to reduce pollution, and he fired back at what he called Hogan's "one-liners and cheap slogans" belittling the O'Malley administration's environmental policies and programs.

"You can't conveniently divert attention to [New York] and Pennsylvania and somehow suggest that there's no responsibility at home to clean the environment," Brown said. While saying he would "where necessary" be firm with other states to see they did their part, he said he found it "troubling" that Hogan would even imply he'd take them to court.

Brown also defends the stormwater fees, though he erroneously calls them a "federal requirement." He says the fees are needed to help the state's largest communities pay for projects to prevent rainfall from washing pollutants into the bay. But in a nod to lingering resentment by some of the "rain tax," Brown said he would seek to standardize the fees, which vary widely among jurisdictions.

While Brown has secured the endorsements of most of the state's mainstream environmental groups, all activists aren't on board. Fred Tutman, the Patuxent Riverkeeper, for example, said he actually agrees with Hogan that the bay cleanup effort is failing and misdirected, though he is wary of Hogan's agenda. As for Brown, Tutman questions the lieutenant governor's "vision" for the environment.

"My impression is he's not a guy heavily involved in these issues," the riverkeeper said.

Brown acknowledges that he didn't deal with the environment under O'Malley, but says that's because the governor handled that himself and asked his lieutenant governor to focus on other things. Since he's begun to run for governor, Brown said, his campaign has "broadened" to include the environment.

"He is bringing it up more," agreed Karla Raettig, executive director of the Maryland League of Conservation Voters, who acknowledged that some environmentalists had wondered early on about the depth of Brown's commitment.

While comfortable now with Brown, Raettig said the environment still is "not at the forefront of everybody's ads and press releases," which tend to focus more on jobs and taxes. Still, she said she hopes the environment will become a bigger issue as the candidates enter the final weeks of their race for governor.

"We feel taking care of the environment is good for the economy," she said.

tim.wheeler@baltsun.com

About this series

This is the second in a series of occasional articles on the candidates' positions on issues in the governor's race.

Their positions

Diverting funds: Hogan has criticized the O'Malley administration for "raiding" land preservation and sewage treatment funds to balance the budget. He vows never to touch that money, though every governor for the past 30 years has tapped the open-space money when times were tight. Brown says the money was needed elsewhere during the recession, but the administration nonetheless found a way to preserve land and expand environmental programs. He said that as governor, he expects to "return to normal budgeting."

Fracking: Brown says he'd allow fracking — drilling for natural gas in Western Maryland using hydraulic fracturing — only if it can be done in a way that doesn't harm the environment, residents or gas well workers. Hogan says he believes fracking can be done in an environmentally sensitive way, and he'd allow it.

Farm runoff rules: The O'Malley administration has proposed regulations that that would curtail use of animal manure as fertilizer on the Eastern Shore. The measure is aimed at reducing phosphorus in the manure from washing into the bay. The rule's potential economic impact is being studied.

Brown says he would he would try to "strike a balance" between the need to reduce pollution and to protect farmers and poultry companies, and suggests he might hold up the rules for more review. Hogan says he recognizes a need to reduce phosphorus pollution, but would "put the brakes" on any regulation that farmers and chicken producers told him would "kill the poultry industry."

Copyright © 2014, [The Baltimore Sun](#)