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Environmental groups lobby EPA on bay

A coalition of 40 groups urge EPA to crack down on pollution

By Cory Nealon

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A coalition of 40 environmental groups sent a letter to the federal government Monday urging it to make good on a promise to restore the Chesapeake Bay.

The National Wildlife Federation, Environment Virginia and others sent the letter to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which on Wednesday is scheduled to respond to President Barack Obama's order to clean up the troubled estuary.

Among other things, the response will address how Virginia, the five other bay states and District of Columbia should reduce pollution, expand public access and assess the effects of climate change on the bay.

The letter is a not-so subtle reminder that the federal government, for the most part, has failed to protect the bay the past four decades. While there are signs of improvement — most pollution is decreasing — the bay and its marine life remain marred by misuse.

"The science is there, the Chesapeake Bay has been studied to death," said Ryan Ewing, a federation spokesman. "Basically what we're trying to do is make this as strong as possible."

Last year, Obama issued an order that recognizes the bay as a "national treasure." He created an EPA-chaired commission that includes representatives from the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense and Homeland Security.

The commission has spent the past year drafting its response to the order. Most of the attention has centered on reducing the amount of harmful nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorus, that enter the bay. Excessive nutrients create oxygen-deprived dead zones that kill fish, bivalves and other marine life.

The EPA promised to punish states that do not reduce pollution by withholding grants, cracking down on farms, and mandating sewer system upgrades. Wednesday's response essentially formalizes what the commission has promised to do.

Although opposed by farmers, builders and other interest groups, environmental activists are confident the EPA will do what it promises. For example, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation last fall put on hold a lawsuit accusing the agency of not enforcing the Clean Water Act. The foundation recently dropped the suit and is expected to announce settlement details Wednesday.

"We're very convinced of the good intentions of this EPA, of this administration," said Doug Siglin, the foundation's Washington, D.C.-based federal affairs director.

The federal government on Wednesday will release its new strategy to clean up the Chesapeake Bay. Environmental groups on Monday sent a letter to the EPA urging tough standards discussed during the past 12 months.