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University of Michigan water quality study based on 15-year-old data

Study uses data compiled between 1987 and 2001, ignores improvements in agricultural practices

LANSING – The **Michigan Agri-Business Association** today called into question a new water quality study released by the University of Michigan, noting the study relies on 15-year-old data and flawed assumptions regarding modern nutrient application in agriculture.

"This study treats Michigan's farmers and producers as if they've operated the same way for decades, and works from assumptions that couldn't be further from reality," said **Dr. Tim Boring**, vice president of research at the **Michigan Agri-Business Association**. "The study uses data from 2001 and employs a methodology that fully ignores fertilizer management improvements in use across Michigan."

Boring pointed to several initial concerns calling the University of Michigan research into question:

The University of Michigan study relies on data that is more than 15 years old, ignoring consistent decreases in fertilizer and manure applications.

"Inputs from farm fertilizers, nonfarm fertilizer, and manure to the watershed were estimated from a USGS report including county-level estimates of annual farm and nonfarm fertilizer sales for 1987-2001 as well as manure production for 1992-1997 (Ruddy et al., 2006)"

- Phosphorus applications have been decreasing annually in the region since the 1990's.

- Bruulsema et al. (2011) tracked phosphorus balance trends in Ontario, Michigan and Ohio from 1955 to 2008, finding a 21% decrease in fertilizer use from 2001 to 2008, an annual decrease of 3%.

The U of M study models deeply outdated fertilizer application practices, totally ignoring the use of advanced soil testing, precision application and other technology used on farms across the state.

- The study assumes that all phosphorus fertilizer is applied in the fall, which is not based in reality. Data from surveys undertaken in Michigan indicate that less than 25% of phosphorus is applied in the fall and in Ohio, 41% is applied in the fall.

- The study assumes that phosphorus applications are not applied based on soil test results and that phosphorus fertilizer is applied to crops each year, regardless of soil test levels. In Michigan, more than 80% of cropland is soil tested prior to application, meaning farmers only use what is necessary for crop production, and more than 50% of cropland acres have fertilizer applied with variable rate technology that only uses the fertilizer needed in a given area within a field.

The study inaccurately suggests that implementing mandatory nutrient management efforts would result in a 50% reduction in phosphorus application.

- At least 41% of cropland in Southeast Michigan and 57% in Northeast Ohio tests in the "very low, low or medium" soil test levels – meaning that soil testing under a nutrient management plan could call for similar or increased phosphorus use.

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