Opening Statement
Chairman Tom Davis
Committee on Government Reform
"A Model for Success? Monitoring, Measuring and Managing
The Health of the Chesapeake Bay"
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Fort Monroe
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I want to welcome everyone to today's hearing on the Chesapeake Bay cleanup effort. The Chesapeake Bay is an ecosystem in crisis. All the witnesses we will hear from today will agree on this point. Large "dead zones," areas of low dissolved oxygen that suffocate and kill native aquatic life, plague the Bay every summer. These dead zones are caused by massive nutrient pollution from numerous man-made sources, exacerbated by natural weather processes. Nitrogen and phosphorous from sewage treatment plants, agricultural industry and urban sprawl are washed down the major rivers that feed into the Bay, fueling the uncontrolled growth of algae blooms that consume great quantities of dissolved oxygen, leaving precious little for oysters, crabs and fish. This algae also blocks out sunlight, killing grasses and other submerged aquatic vegetation.

This environmental crisis threatens to destroy a Bay that is enjoyed by recreational admirers and upon which industrial fishermen and their families depend. Indeed, this is a vital economic interest for the states involved. For example, the Virginia Seafood Council has estimated that commercial fishing contributes $450 million annually to the economy of Virginia alone. Yet seafood harvests from the Bay continue to shrink. In 1985, only 19 years ago, Virginia oystermen were able to pull 1 million bushels of oysters from the Bay; in 2003 they harvested less than 15,000. In short, it is a crisis that concerns all of us, not only in this region – Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania – but across the country as well.

Since its creation in 1983, the Chesapeake Bay Program has been the coordinating agency for the effort to clean up the Bay. The Program is a regional partnership that includes the states of Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia, a tri-state legislative body called the Chesapeake Bay Commission, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The Program has been hailed as a model, both for estuarine research and for regional coordination of local, state and Federal stakeholders in meeting environmental challenges that span multiple jurisdictions.

In 1987 the Chesapeake Bay Program set the water quality goal of reducing the levels of nitrogen and phosphorous in the Bay by 40 percent by 2000. However, over the years the Program has been forced to repeatedly lower expectations in the face of the great challenges it faces in accomplishing this mission. Using an advanced computer model that has been described by one Program spokesman as "the Cadillac of watershed models around the world," the Program has reported reductions of 28 percent for phosphorous and 18 percent for nitrogen since 1985. The Program also has many water

quality monitoring stations spread throughout the region. However, according to recent media reports using just such water sample data from the U.S. Geological Survey, there has been little or no improvement in phosphorous or nitrogen levels.

The recent media attention on apparent inconsistencies between progress reported and progress made has prompted many in the scientific and environmental communities to question not only the effectiveness of the Program's computer modeling but even its fundamental commitment to cleaning up the Bay. Some claim the Program's over-reliance on computer modeling and inadequate use of actual water sample data has created a false sense of security among policymakers and the public. However, Program officials have strongly denied that they neglect water sampling in favor of total reliance on a computer model. They say the Program utilizes about 100 different indicators to develop an accurate picture of the Bay's health and that only 11 of these are based entirely on computer models.

The Committee hopes to clear the air today, or perhaps the water, over the Chesapeake Bay Program's modeling and monitoring procedures. We also want to get a status update from those on the front lines of the battle to save the Bay and learn what, if anything, Congress can do to help.