A novel strategy to reduce farm runoff will be tested starting in Minnesota

January 17 2012, By Josephine Marcotty

Minnesota will be the nation's first test site for a novel federal program designed to stem the flow of agricultural pollution that is strangling some of the country's great waterways, including the Chesapeake Bay, the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi River.

Gov. Mark Dayton is expected to announce Minnesota's leading role in the project at the Capitol on Tuesday morning, with Tom Vilsack, the U.S. secretary of agriculture and Lisa Jackson, administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, at his side.

They are promoting the pilot project as a the start of an ambitious federal strategy that in essence would give farmers a green seal of approval if they voluntarily choose to put land conservation and water quality ahead of crop yields.

Behind the new strategy is a combination of political and fiscal realities, officials said: The public is increasingly concerned about clean water for drinking, swimming and wildlife. But imposing environmental rules on farmers - the primary source of unregulated water pollution in Minnesota - faces insurmountable political hurdles. At the same time, funding for long-standing farm conservation programs is facing major cutbacks in the upcoming farm bill, victim of the federal budget and the anti-regulatory fervor in Washington.

"We do not want to take a step back" in conservation, Vilsack said in an interview last week. "We are seeing progress."

Farmers who participate would agree to follow land management practices that slow soil erosion and runoff of fertilizers, pesticides and manure into streams and groundwater. In exchange, they would get financial and technical support and be protected against any new environmental requirements during the life of their agreement, perhaps as long as 10 years.

Participating farmers would also be certified through the new Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program, a seal of approval that could be used as a marketing tool for buyers and, eventually, on consumer products.

"The hope is that it would steer producers to meet consumer demand to be more responsible about water quality," said Deborah Swackhamer, an expert on water pollution at the University of Minnesota, and a member of the EPA's scientific advisory panel.

Already, however, the plan is generating sharp criticism from some conservation and water quality advocates. They say that 40 years of voluntary efforts have been insufficient to reduce the farm runoff that dumps sediment, bacteria and other pollutants into Minnesota's rivers and streams. The state is only now starting to fulfill the requirements of the 1970s-era federal Clean Water Act in clearly identifying specific sources of water pollution across Minnesota's 81 watersheds.

Skeptics say the new plan would exempt farmers from specific requirements to reduce their contribution to overall runoff, creating an unfair burden for cities, sewage treatment plants and other landowners who will be asked to bear significant costs to achieve water quality standards.

"It enshrines the old ways, defying all rationality," said Whitney Clark, executive director of Friends of the Mississippi, an environmental

advocacy group.

Vilsack said Minnesota was chosen as the test site for a number of reasons. It's a big agricultural state - half the state's land mass is controlled by farmers, who make up about 2 percent of the population.

It's also home of the headwaters of the Mississippi, a river with so much agricultural pollution that it's created a massive "dead zone" at its mouth in the Gulf of Mexico. The Dayton administration was eager to embrace program, Vilsack said, and it fits in with the state's strong conservation ethic.

Even more importantly for proving its effectiveness, Minnesota controls its own water quality destiny. All the water that winds up in its thousands of lakes and rivers comes from the sky in the form of rain. Virtually all its water pollution comes from its farmers, businesses, and residents.

"It's a great opportunity for Minnesota to help lead the way, and for us to use our financial and technical assistance to expand conservation," Vilsack said.

Funding would most likely be determined by the next federal farm bill, which Congress is expected to take up this year, Vilsack said. Already, Congressional leaders have made it clear that the popular Conservation Reserve Program, in which farmers are paid to set aside environmentally sensitive land, will be cut, perhaps drastically. Other rules and funding for farm conservation may also be cut.

"We are obviously going to be challenged to have the resources to meet the needs in rural America, including investment in conservation," Vilsack said.

Dayton is expected to announce the signing of a memorandum of

understanding with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the EPA.

Environmental groups and other experts say the critical issue will be whether the program is incorporated with specific clean-up plans. For example, the state is just completing a massive analysis of pollution in the lower Mississippi River and Lake Pepin. Researchers have found that the sediment from the Minnesota River valley that is clouding the Mississippi and filling upÂ Lake Pepin has increased tenfold in the last century - largely as a result of heavily cultivated corn and soybeans replacing native prairie.

If the new program integrates farmers into a targeted clean-up plan for the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, it might work, Clark said. But if it simply protects farmers from having to make real changes to slow the loss of water and soil from their land, then it won't.

Others, however, say the certification program will be a significant improvement. Now, farmers are exempt from the Clean Water Act and most other environmental regulations. This program, which would combine support, subsidies and some certainty about the future, will encourage them to do more, Swackhamer said.

"It's a huge step in the right direction to get farmers engaged in the best management practices and to see how effective they are," she said. "There is a lot riding on this."