

West Virginia's Chesapeake Bay Biennial Riparian Forest Buffer (RFB) Work Plan Priority Actions. Jan 2016 – Dec 2017

The Chesapeake Bay RFB Management Strategy calls for follow-up action by Bay states to complete a biennial work plan. As stated in the WV RFB strategy recently completed by the USDA task force, RFB's are a cost-effective means to reduce nutrient (nitrogen/phosphorus loading) into the Chesapeake Bay and are an integral element of West Virginia's Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP). The State's WIP would increase the amount of riparian buffers by 6,931 (WIP goal by 2025) acres from the 2009 baseline level.

In WV, CREP has been the principle program for the creation and protection of new riparian buffers in West Virginia's Chesapeake Bay watershed. WV believes that this will continue to be the principle program to support in all agencies. However there are many other RFB programs that have been highlighted and prioritized in the recent buffer strategies. This biennial work plan summary will highlight specific RFB management approaches in WV Bay program and outline partner involvement. The supporting RFB matrix will spell out other aspects of each management approach.

Summary of Management Approaches

Each Management Approach will identify key actions, performance targets and participating entities. See matrix for additional information.

Management Approach #1: Improve RFB Leadership

Although this begins with developing a more active WV buffer work group, state leadership at the top of key agencies such as WVDOT, Dep of AG, WVCA and WVDEP must buy into the importance of this practice for the betterment of WV waters. The current climate of state legislature is a challenge. The WV bay Trib team must continue to find opportunities to influence state leadership.

Concerning the WV buffer work group, committing to conference calls every two months is a challenge that must be met. Another option is to follow up the WV Bay Trib team calls with a buffer discussion. These options are ways to stay focused on these management approaches. In addition an annual face to face meeting for evaluation and tracking progress is imperative.

Management Approach #2: RFB Program Enhancements

Financing to improving staffing to provide better technical assistance (TA) for riparian forest buffers and related practices is at the heart of this approach. Local level leadership should prioritize TA for riparian forest buffers ---counties that prioritize riparian forest buffers have more success than those that do not. One of the main items in the USDA strategy was the development of the

circuit rider team concept. This “team” of experts is trained with the knowledgeable of opportunities and program requirements. This team will impact the establishment of RFB’s on the non-farm side as well.

Also providing more training for technical service providers, land trusts, foresters, and other partners on the importance of riparian forest buffers. Training should include the assessment of the costs/benefits of forest buffers for landowners, and marketing strategies. Supporting the organization of another CREP training workshop for new employees is included.

Management Approach #3: RFB Technical Assistance

Staffing a CREP forester in each Conservation District is now within the realm of possibility. Utilizing FSA money from the USFS and the Bay Program’s Implementation Grant funding will make this a reality in this two year plan. Key players here are WV DEP and Alliance for the Bay which has stepped up to assist with the hiring. Also we look to solidify the development of a network of providers to deliver full services to producers (construct fence, water facilities, stream crossing, site prep, tree planting, and maintenance). Trout Unlimited is making it a one stop shop by doing it all.

Management Approach #4: RFB Outreach and Increasing New Enrollment

Many of the key actions in this approach are part of the 1.3 million requested under the Bay RFB initiative. Some actions involve increasing the maintenance and marginal pastureland rates, and increase some program flexibility. FSA and WVCA are also part of the steering committee that is preparing outreach materials and tools to increase understanding and awareness.

1. Improve outreach through partners/programs
 - a) Use one-on-one outreach efforts – through the use of staff with good backgrounds of buffers and good marketing skills
 - b) Seek to increase role of partners in outreach, particularly groups that have a huge mailing list such as Farm Bureau
 - c) Work with State Agencies to cross-sell RFB enrollments when discussing Ag certainty.
 - d) Explore outreach possibilities with partners with successful RCPP
 - e) Deliver consistent message to producers, from multiple sources
 - f) Develop Q&A notebook for contract holders.

Management Approach #5: Improve Establishment/Maintenance/ Verification

Key actions involve training all employees and TSP’s in the new verification protocol. This training will be coordinated by the WV Trib team in 2016. Also in this biennial period, the goal is to maintain the summer intern program for one to two more summers depending on funding

Management Approach #6: Improve Re-enrollment

The FSA has several targets in this important approach to assist with re-enrollment which will begin kicking in during the next two years. In addition, WVCA will be assisting at farm meetings or with a workshop to promote re-enrollment.

Management Approach #7: Improve Targeting

This key action involves the use of the CREP targeting tool. The tool has been created in no less than four watersheds and there is a potential for more given parcel availability. WVDOT will continue to utilize GIS to then be able to identify and target buffer needs in watersheds. They will also train TSP's in other agencies to assist in targeting.

Management Approach #8: Ramp up Conservation of RFB including easement Programs

During the re-enrollment stage, it is imperative to attempt to re-enroll a percentage of buffers into a permanent easements. This calls for the involvement of local land trusts and farmland protection boards. In addition the education of all partners in not only conserving high-value forests and farms but to emphasize RFB conservation as well.

Management Approach #9: Focus on non-Ag RFB

The Chesapeake Bay forester does have the emphasis through CBIG funding to provide this service but more boots on the ground are needed. CBIG funding can be increased in 2016 to allow for CREP foresters to organize 1-2 non-Ag buffers per year. Also encouraging other agencies to organize these plantings with DOT assistance may help to get more non-AG buffers on the ground. The important component that should remain involves the public participation and education.

As it states in the Bay RFB management strategy, "Federal, state and private partners have been working together to restore the Chesapeake Bay and its watersheds for over 30 years. Since the first Chesapeake Bay goals were set, nearly 8,000 miles of forest buffers have been planted in the Bay watershed..." Steering committees were formed, roundtable were convened, summits were held. State task forces now have the chance to make an impact.