

Chesapeake Riparian Forest Buffer Initiative

Once a model success story for the Chesapeake Bay Program partnership, the annual rate of riparian forest buffer establishment has been steadily declining since 2002. While funding levels have remained high, annual accomplishments have fallen far behind goals set by the states and far below the commitments made by federal agencies in response to the President's Executive Order of 2009.

Aggressive commitments to implementation of riparian forest buffers were also included by the states in EPA-approved Watershed Implementation Plans. These plans serve as the blueprint for attainment of pollution reductions called for in the 2010 Chesapeake Bay TMDL. Failure to reach the goals laid out in this latest commitment carries with it the spectre of difficult regulatory decisions in 2017 and 2025, when reductions are mandated.

The EPA and the USDA propose an Initiative to identify and evaluate the current challenges to implementation and develop a strategy for overcoming barriers in order to accelerate riparian forest buffer progress to meet established state and federal goals.

The Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay has formed an interagency and public/private Steering Committee to coordinate the initiative. We will engage partners throughout 2014 (and into 2015) through a process including the following activities and events:

A Initiative Steering Committee (April 2014 to end)

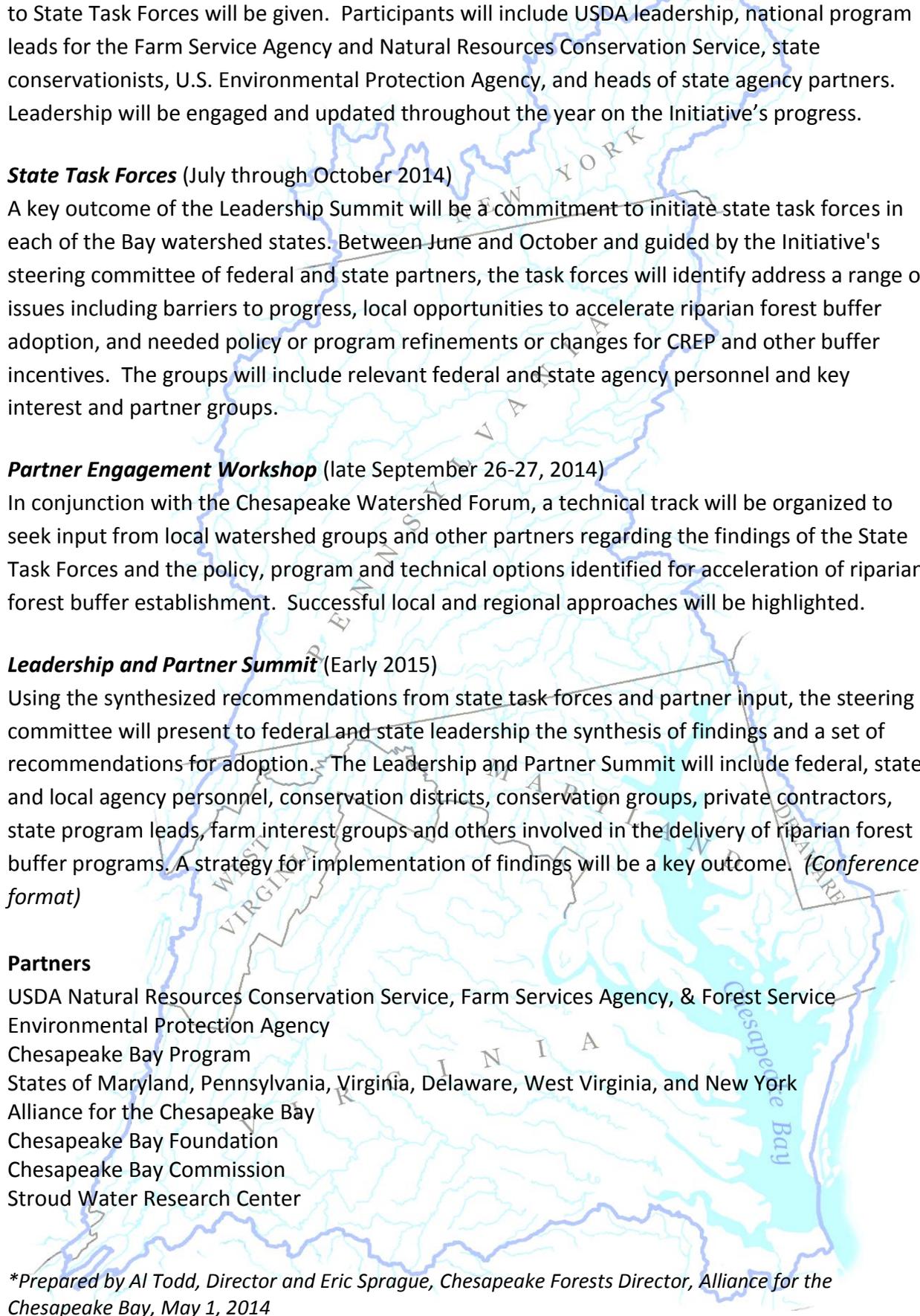
This group will guide the process, compile needed background information, respond to syntheses of findings, develop cross-cutting recommendations, and oversee and help guide the state task forces. The Steering Committee will be chaired and staffed by the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay with members from federal and state agencies and key partner groups engaged in riparian forest buffer efforts in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Innovator's Roundtable (May 21, 2014)

A group of private and public organizations implementing riparian forest buffers will convene to examine and document forest buffer establishment success and challenges, identify key areas where additional work is needed, and outline areas of discussion for agency leadership and state task forces.

Riparian Buffer Initiative Leadership Summit (June 12, 2014)

To kick-off the initiative, a gathering of key leadership will be held to highlight the unique importance of forest buffers to the Chesapeake, review local success stories, seek consensus on the issues that should be addressed, and commit to a process and allocation of staff resources for determining the key actions needed to accelerate riparian forest buffer adoption. A charge



to State Task Forces will be given. Participants will include USDA leadership, national program leads for the Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service, state conservationists, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and heads of state agency partners. Leadership will be engaged and updated throughout the year on the Initiative's progress.

State Task Forces (July through October 2014)

A key outcome of the Leadership Summit will be a commitment to initiate state task forces in each of the Bay watershed states. Between June and October and guided by the Initiative's steering committee of federal and state partners, the task forces will identify address a range of issues including barriers to progress, local opportunities to accelerate riparian forest buffer adoption, and needed policy or program refinements or changes for CREP and other buffer incentives. The groups will include relevant federal and state agency personnel and key interest and partner groups.

Partner Engagement Workshop (late September 26-27, 2014)

In conjunction with the Chesapeake Watershed Forum, a technical track will be organized to seek input from local watershed groups and other partners regarding the findings of the State Task Forces and the policy, program and technical options identified for acceleration of riparian forest buffer establishment. Successful local and regional approaches will be highlighted.

Leadership and Partner Summit (Early 2015)

Using the synthesized recommendations from state task forces and partner input, the steering committee will present to federal and state leadership the synthesis of findings and a set of recommendations for adoption. The Leadership and Partner Summit will include federal, state and local agency personnel, conservation districts, conservation groups, private contractors, state program leads, farm interest groups and others involved in the delivery of riparian forest buffer programs. A strategy for implementation of findings will be a key outcome. *(Conference format)*

Partners

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Services Agency, & Forest Service
Environmental Protection Agency
Chesapeake Bay Program
States of Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Delaware, West Virginia, and New York
Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Chesapeake Bay Commission
Stroud Water Research Center

**Prepared by Al Todd, Director and Eric Sprague, Chesapeake Forests Director, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, May 1, 2014*