Shallow Water Habitats in the Revised *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*

Shallow Water Sentinel Site Program Workshop
September 17, 2025

proposed revised vision statement

We envision a Chesapeake Bay region where clean waters flow freely, wildlife thrives, and farms, forests and fisheries are healthy and productive. It is a place where people from all walks of life feel connected to the land, to the Bay and local waterways, to their communities and to the rich cultural heritage that makes this watershed unique. Together, we are building a future that is environmentally and economically sustainable, resilient and full of possibility—where everyone can enjoy and protect the natural beauty of the Bay, and the lands and waters that surround it, today and for generations to come.

fish habitat outcome and targets

- Achieve and maintain suitable shallow water fish habitat in tidal and non-tidal areas for key species through focused water quality, conservation and restoration improvements informed by a synthesis of fisheries science and habitat assessments.

    - Continually improve the quantity and quality of **shallow water fish habitat** in tidal areas above baseline conditions as determined by a Bay-wide assessment of fish habitat conditions completed in 2026.

    - Increase the consideration of **forage species** in fishery management decision-making for key predators by annually developing reports of prey status as good, uncertain or poor.

    - Establish a **baseline and assess the overall condition and suitability of fish habitat** in the watershed to support healthy communities and inform effective restoration, conservation and management actions.

    - Develop an **acid mine drainage target**, in collaboration with the Brook Trout Outcome, that strives to better understand the impacts and mitigation opportunities for acid mine drainage throughout the watershed.

    - Develop **freshwater mussel conservation plans** for five tributaries and begin implementation by 2035.

what the feedback is saying

- Set enforceable limits and stronger oversight to combat overharvesting of menhaden and other forage species.
- Targets should be more measurable, clearer and avoid management processes.
- Strong support for inclusion of freshwater mussels but feel timelines should be accelerated and plans expanded to include more tributaries and concrete restoration actions.
- Bay health assessments must integrate forage-predator dynamics, reduce overfishing across all species, address invasive species and adopt a holistic, sustainability-focused approach.

wetlands outcome and targets

- Restore, create, enhance and protect wetlands to support people and living resources, including waterbirds and fish, provide water quality, flood and erosion protection, recreation and other valuable benefits to people.

  - **Tidal Wetlands Target**: Restore or create 1,000 acres and enhance 15,000 acres by 2035.
  - **Non-Tidal Wetlands Target**: Restore or create 2,000 acres and enhance 15,000 acres by 2035.
  - **Buffer Protection Target**: Same as the Protected Lands Outcome and will be tracked under that Outcome.
  - **Waterbirds** represent wetlands functioning at its highest level; priorities for specific species will be developed over the next 12 to 18 months.

what the feedback is saying

- Targets are too low and greatly reduced from the 2014 agreement.
- Restoration should be balanced with stronger, permanent protections, buffer zones and strategies for wetland mitigation under changing environmental conditions.
- “No net loss” policies are not working—stronger adaptation and regulation is needed.
- Progress tracking should include both gains and losses, reporting needs to be transparent and definitions clarified.
- Consider adding or refining biological indicators to link wetlands directly to thriving wildlife outcomes.

water quality standards attainment & monitoring outcome and targets

- Measure changing water quality conditions by maintaining core monitoring networks, evaluating attainment of established water quality standards (i.e., dissolved oxygen, clarity and chlorophyll-a) in the Bay and strengthening scientific understanding and communication of patterns in nitrogen, phosphorus, sediment and other parameters throughout the Bay and watershed.
    - Maintain Monitoring Networks: Annually, maintain full core monitoring network operations to support analysis and communication of water quality loads, water quality trends and water quality standards attainment
    - Develop Methods for Water Quality Standards Attainment: Develop and expand partnership approved approaches to support assessment of all dissolved oxygen, clarity and chlorophyll a criteria in all designated uses using all available data. For dissolved oxygen criteria assessment, have methods established and approved by 2028 and applied in reporting by the end of 2030.
    - Evaluate Water Quality Standards Attainment: Through management actions in support of the Reducing Excess Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Sediment Outcome, maintain a long-term trend of improvement in the water quality standards attainment indicator at a rate of at least 0.2% per year, aligned with the historical baseline trend of the multi-metric water quality standards indicator between 1985 and 2022. Update the water quality standards attainment indicator annually.
    - Calculate Water Quality Loads and Trends:
        - Watershed: In coordination with the Reducing Excess Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Sediment Outcome, compute and communicate loads and trends in nitrogen, phosphorous and sediment for the watershed. On an annual basis produce the load and trend analyses and communication results for the nine major river system river input monitoring sites. Conduct the same analysis for the complete non-tidal network on a biennial basis.
        - Tidal Bay and tidal tributaries: On an annual basis for the tidal Bay and tributary stations, compute and communicate trends for physical, chemical and biological measures.

what the feedback is saying

- Call for higher, science-based goals that contain clear links to the Bay TMDL requirements; 0.2% annual improvement rate is seen as inadequate.
- Strong emphasis on maintaining and growing core monitoring networks; expansion of monitoring networks to include shallow water sites, storm-event sampling and standardized local data collection protocols.
- Language is too vague and technical.
- Many targets are seen as activities rather than true outcomes. Outcomes should focus on measurable environmental changes.
- Clear communication of progress is needed, including side by side comparisons with past goals and reporting that balances modeled data with monitored outcomes to better ground truth progress and guide adaptive management.

submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) outcome and targets

- Sustain and increase the habitat and ecosystem benefits of SAV in the Chesapeake Bay. Achieve and sustain the outcome of 196,000 acres of SAV Bay-wide, which is necessary for a restored Bay.
    - Progress toward this Outcome will be measured against interim targets of 90,000 acres by 2030 and 95,000 acres by 2035.
    - Progress will also be measured against the following targets for each salinity zone:
        - Tidal Fresh: 21,330 acres
        - Low Salinity: 13,094 acres
        - Medium Salinity: 126,032 acres
        - High Salinity: 35,790 acres

what the feedback is saying

- Targets are too low and greatly reduced from the 2014 agreement.
- Interim and salinity zone goals should be clear, consistent and in public friendly language.
- Targets should be more flexible and science-based (e.g., use rolling averages, link goals to regulatory standards, update targets as monitoring capacity)
- Incorporate climate-driven salinity changes, prioritize native grasses and consider targeted SAV restoration beyond water quality improvement.
- Confusion between interim and long-term targets; highlight challenges of measurement and monitoring and present targets in a way that is ambitious and realistic.

thank you!

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