

Chesapeake Bay Program Communications Strategic Plan
Chesapeake Bay Program Communications Office
Revised 2023–2024



All photos courtesy of the Chesapeake Bay Program.

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Acronym List

Bay TMDL = Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load

CBP = Chesapeake Bay Program

DEIJ = Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice

EPA = Environmental Protection Agency

GIT = Goal Implementation Team

SET = Strategic Engagement Team

Glossary

Chesapeake Bay Program: Also referred to as the “partnership”, this includes everyone that participates in an advisory committee, Goal Implementation Team, workgroup or action team, or works within the Chesapeake Bay Program Office.

Chesapeake Bay Program Office: Includes the staff that works at the Chesapeake Bay Program Office in Annapolis, Maryland, as well as the coordinators and staffers that are responsible for managing advisory committees, Goal Implementation Teams, workgroups and action teams.

Strategic Engagement Team: Members work to support advise advisory committees, Goal Implementation Teams, workgroups and action teams on how best to integrate communications, outreach, local engagement, social science, diversity and stewardship needs into their work to assist in meeting the goals and outcomes of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*.

Signatory Partners: Refers to the following entities that signed the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*: the states of Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia, the Chesapeake Bay Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Background

Chesapeake Bay Program

Since 1983, the Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) has led and directed the restoration and protection of the Chesapeake Bay. The CBP connects representatives from across the 64,000-square-mile watershed, and includes representatives from federal, state and local governments, academic institutions, nonprofits and more. The most recent *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*, signed in 2014, guides the work of the CBP. This agreement is a plan for collaboration across political boundaries, and signatories include the seven watershed jurisdictions of Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia, as well as the Chesapeake Bay Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency on behalf of the federal government.

The *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement* established ten goals to advance the restoration and protection of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Each goal is linked to a set of outcomes which directly contribute to its achievement.

The organizational structure of the CBP consists of the Chesapeake Executive Council, Principals' Staff Committee and Management Board, who provide leadership for the restoration and protection strategy for the Bay and its living resources. Additionally, the CBP is organized into advisory committees, Goal Implementation Teams (GITs), workgroups and action teams to meet the goals of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*.

Specifically, the GITs developed management strategies for the outcomes that support the goals of the *Watershed Agreement*, and each member of the partnership has identified the management strategies they plan to participate in. CBP partners, including but not limited to, federal agencies, state and local governments, nonprofits and academia, work together through the Executive Council, Principals' Staff Committee, Management Board, advisory committees, GITs, workgroups and action teams to collaborate, share information and set goals.

Chesapeake Bay Program Communications Office

As the voice of the partnership, the CBP Communications Office tells the story of the Chesapeake Bay watershed through policy, science and data. It does this through media outreach, web- and print-based products, multimedia, outreach and engagement with stakeholders around the watershed, including internally within the partnership.

The Communications Office consists of five full-time staff that are primarily employed through two cooperative agreements with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay—a communications director, multimedia manager, web content manager and outreach specialist. The office also includes a communications staffer supported by the Chesapeake Research Consortium's Environmental Management Career Development Program.

The primary responsibility of the CBP Communications Office is to support the communications and outreach needs of the 10 goals and 31 outcomes of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*. This entails working closely with the six GITs and multiple workgroups and action teams that support these goals and outcomes. However, it is vital to the success of the partnership that the CBP Communications Office works with all partners equally in support of the restoration and protection of the Chesapeake Bay and its watershed, including the Chesapeake Executive Council, Principals' Staff Committee, Management Board and across the three advisory committees.

Strategic Engagement Team

In fall 2022, the CBP Communications Director, EPA Social Science Lead and Coordinator of the Local Leadership Workgroup came together to form the Strategic Engagement Team (SET). SET combines the partnership's expertise in communications, outreach, marketing, local engagement, diversity, stewardship and social science to support advisory committees, GITs, workgroups and action teams on how to integrate these disciplines into their work. SET replaces the former Communications Workgroup and Local Engagement Action Team. The CBP Communications Office provides coordination and staffing for SET.



Introduction

This Communications Strategic Plan will be used to guide the CBP Communications Office as it strives to meet the communications and outreach needs of the partnership to help further progress on the goals and outcomes of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*. As the CBP Communications Office is tasked with providing communications and outreach support to the overall partnership, it is recommended that the findings, goals and recommendations within this plan guide advisory committees, workgroups, actions teams and advisory committees as they consider their own communications and outreach planning and priorities.

Projects, programs and other activities that are specific to a federal, state or local government agency, academic institution or non-profit (e.g., the Chesapeake Bay Program Total Maximum Daily Load, University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science Chesapeake Bay Report Card) may request the opinions and expertise of the CBP Communications Office, but should work with their own staff to meet their communications and outreach needs, while adhering to the communications and outreach style and standards put forth by their home organization.

In order to develop a strong and strategic communications plan that supports the needs and priorities of the partnership, the CBP Communications Office retained a contractor, The Hatcher Group, to assist in outreach, information gathering, research and synthesis efforts. Additionally, the CBP Communications Office conducted an internal communications audit in order to provide a baseline for this communications strategic plan. Based on insights from surveys, focus groups and other forms of research, this plan contains recommendations and tactics informed by these findings to ensure that the CBP Communications Office is operating efficiently while providing effective communications and outreach guidance to the partnership.

In framing the recommendations and tactics within this communications strategic plan, the CBP Communications Office sought to fully take charge of the recommendations, ensuring they were achievable by a small team with a multitude of responsibilities. The previous [*Strategic Communications Plan for the Chesapeake Bay Program*](#) contained extremely detailed goals, recommendations and activities that have now been streamlined to better complement the deliverables within the two EPA cooperative agreements that manage the CBP Communications Office.

The CBP is currently in a time of transition as it considers the next phase of Bay restoration. As the CBP Communications Office is called to assist with communications and outreach related to efforts to revise the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement* and streamlining of the partnership's organizational structure, this communications strategic plan may be updated to provide accurate, consistent messaging, communications products and other activities for its audiences.

Audiences

The CBP Communications Office serves a diversity of audiences, both internally to the partnership and externally across the watershed. At times, internal and external audiences may overlap, as some of the entities listed under “CBP partners” below are not intimately familiar with the work of the partnership but may still be considered as primary audiences for various communications.

First and foremost, the primary audience for the CBP Communications Office is the partnership at large. Partnership refers to:

- Chesapeake Executive Council.
- Principals’ Staff Committee.
- Management Board.
- Advisory Committees.
- Goal Implementation Team members.
- Workgroup and action team members.

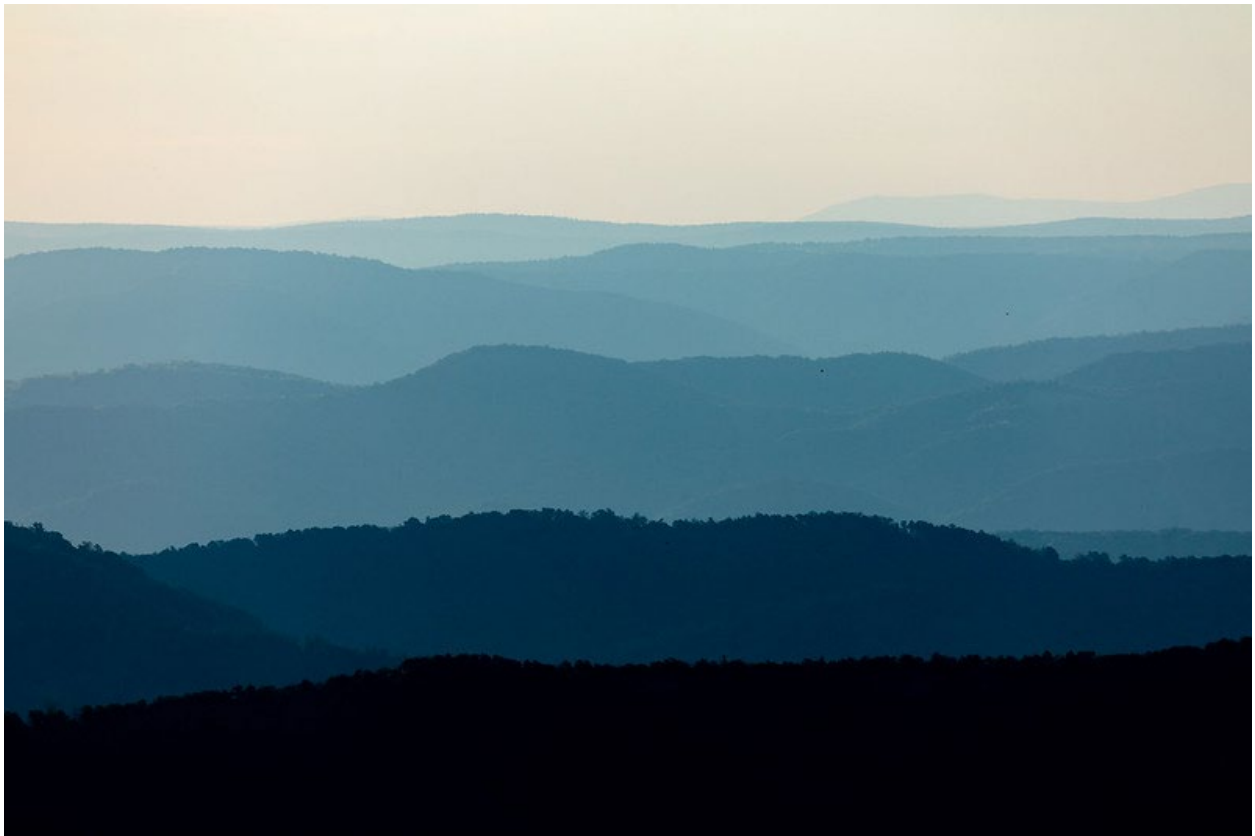
Members of the above groups represent federal agencies, state environmental, natural resources and agricultural agencies, academic institutions and nonprofit organizations. Engaging with these entities and helping foster and grow internal communication is paramount to the success of the partnership. That being said, internal communications it is not the sole responsibility of the CBP Communications Office, but rather a shared concern across all partners.

The next audience primarily served by the CBP Communications Office is media, students, teachers and residents of the watershed who are interested in the environment and water quality. Through resources such as press releases, blogs, social media and the CBP website, the CBP Communications Office provides resources to inform, educate and engage with these audiences. A main goal of the CBP Communications Office is to deliver the most authoritative sources of information on the Chesapeake Bay, providing the most current data, while connecting these audiences to relevant subject matter experts and organizations, if needed.

It is important to note that the CBP Communications Office works with leadership and staff of the EPA Chesapeake Bay Program Office on programs and projects that relate to the partnership and the *Watershed Agreement*.

Other audiences served by the work of the CBP Communications Office include local elected officials, local government staff and planners, federal and state legislators and their staffs, and federal agencies, state environmental, natural resources and agricultural agencies, academic institutions and nonprofit organizations that do not regularly engage with the CBP in one of the above-defined partnership groups. Serving these audiences is dependent upon the communications and outreach work that is undertaken to help the partnership meet the goals and outcomes of the *Watershed Agreement*. These are considered secondary audiences for the CBP Communications Office and are considered equally.

It is critical to note that the CBP Communications Office does not work directly with individuals to further the goals and outcomes of the *Watershed Agreement*. The small but mighty CBP Communications Office respects the work and time of its many partners in building strong relationships across the watershed. Through the forthcoming CBP Outreach Strategy, the CBP Communications Office realizes the importance of building networks to foster two-way engagement with those partners working directly on the ground with other organizations and individuals.



Current Communications Products & Services

As our audiences are diverse, both internally in the partnership and externally across the watershed, the CBP Communications Office utilizes a variety of communications and outreach products and services to meet their unique needs. The below list are the products and services currently available to the Communications Office.

As noted in the Introduction of this Communications Strategic Plan, the primary role of the CBP Communications Office is to support the communications and outreach needs and priorities of the partnership. There is no general, one-size-fits-all approach for a communications strategy. Each need and priority is unique, requiring its own strategy for success and the chosen products and services in which to engage with audiences will vary.

- **Articles/Editorials:** CBP Communications Office blogs are regularly reprinted in outside media sources. Additionally, the CBP Communications Office regularly contributes editorials to the Bay Journal, and on a lesser degree, other media outlets.
- **Blogs:** Manages a robust blog (<https://www.chesapeakebay.net/news/blog>) featuring articles about watershed science, restoration successes, wildlife stories, stewardship opportunities and information on travel, recreation and culture.
- **Case Studies:** Developed in 2022, the CBP Communications Office maintains the [Beyond Environmental Benefits Case Study Database](#) in order to inform audiences about the environmental, community and economic benefits of conservation practices throughout the watershed.
- **Listserv:** Owner of a listserv for Chesapeake Bay watershed communications professionals to share announcements, jobs, events and other Bay-related activities and information.
- **Multimedia:** Photos for both print- and web-based content, longer form educational videos and social media videos, and maintains a robust multimedia archive.
- **Newsletters:** The CBP Communications Office maintains three newsletters: Bay News (daily), Bay Brief (weekly) and Chesapeake Currents (monthly).
- **Outreach:** The CBP Communications Office sponsors conferences, tables at events and provides resources for the partnership to engage with outside audiences. The addition of an outreach specialist will only serve to strengthen this function and build lasting networks across the watershed.
- **Press Releases:** All press releases can be found at <https://www.chesapeakebay.net/news/presscenter>.
- **Shared Messaging:** Monthly [shared messaging](#) sent to communications professionals in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.
- **Social Media:** Maintain regular presence on the following social media outlets:
 - [Facebook](#)
 - [Instagram](#)
 - [LinkedIn](#)
 - [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#)
- **Web Content:** The CBP Communications Office is responsible for maintaining the content on [chesapeakebay.net](https://www.chesapeakebay.net), which includes regular engagement with the CBP Web

Team to ensure all webpages are up-to-date and contain useful information for audiences.

- **Webinars:** Webinars may be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72XvLKWKqkg&list=PLRa28NrZJAF6wSTLTXyiO2P_wP2vO4R2v.



Current Cooperative Agreement Deliverables

The CBP Communications Office manages two cooperative agreements, funded by the EPA. The first, *FY 2021 CBP Strategic Communications and Media Support*, provides overall communications and multimedia support to the partnership. The CBP Communications Director, Multimedia Manager and Web Content Manager all work under this cooperative agreement. The second cooperative agreement, *Chesapeake Bay Outreach and Engagement Support*, seeks to further engage stakeholders, communities and organizations throughout the watershed with the partnership's work. This cooperative agreement funds the Outreach Specialist position. Outlined below are the current deliverables the CBP Communications Office is responsible for under the *FY 2021 CBP Strategic Communications and Media Support* cooperative agreement. This section will be updated if the workplan for this cooperative agreement changes in the future.

FY 2021 CBP Strategic Communications and Media Support

Objective 1: Expert development and implementation of Strategic Communications Plan in support of the communications needs and priorities of the CBP partnership.

Deliverables:

- One (1) comprehensive strategic communications plan that supports the communications, engagement and outreach needs and priorities of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement* and the CBP partnership.
- One (1) internal communications audit which will help provide a baseline to inform the above-referenced strategic communications plan.
- Coordinate four (4) quarterly SET meetings per year. (*Note: In 2022, the existing Communications Workgroup and Local Engagement Action Team combined to form the Strategic Engagement Team.*)
- Five (5) editorials or articles published by outside media sources each year.
- Comprehensive media list updated at a minimum of four times per year.
- Six (6) media releases related to partnership efforts issued each year.
- Twenty-five to thirty (25-30) media articles highlighting CBP work per year.
- One (1) communications, engagement and/or outreach training to CBP partners per year.
- One (1) professional conference and/or training attended by each Alliance staff member per year.

Objective 2: Expert creative material development, distribution and management of print, multimedia and online products to support the stated objectives of the strategic communications plan.

Deliverables:

- Regular attendance and engagement with SET to understand the communications, outreach and engagement needs of the 10 goals and 31 outcomes of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*. (*Note: The Strategic Engagement Team covers, among others,*

the communications, marketing and engagement needs of the 10 goals and 31 outcomes of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement. The CBP Communications office works with GITs and workgroups to regularly address and meet these needs.)

- Engagement with and regular attendance at Diversity Workgroup meetings.
- One (1) content strategy for flagship website, www.chesapeakebay.net, in Year 3.
- One (1) updated branding and style guide in Year 2.
- Eighty-four (84) new blogs for <https://www.chesapeakebay.net/news/blog> written each year.
- At least twelve (12) of the above-referenced 84 blogs will highlight under-represented and under-served communities, as well as the CBP's progress toward meeting the Diversity Outcome in the *Watershed Agreement*. These stories will incorporate multimedia, resulting in original photography.
- Twenty-four (24) new species will be added to the [Field Guide](#) each year.
- Additional fifty (50) updates to online content each year.
- Five hundred (500) new digital images are added to the photo archive each year.
- Maintain a robust photo and video archive that is accessible to partners and media.
- Four (4) flagship videos per year.
- Twenty (20) multimedia products each year tailored for and featured on CBP social media platforms.
- 50,000 video views per year.
- Fifty (50) online embeds or requests by partners or outside organizations for use of CBP communications products per year.
- Requests received to use multimedia content result in at least twelve (12) stories by outside media outlets per year.
- Fifty (50) issues of e-newsletters each year.
- Respond to public inquiries in a timely manner through chesapeakebay.net and social media platforms.
- Additional digital content and/or written projects that will be determined over the life of the grant.

Objective 3: Expanded outreach through social media, public forums and conferences to support the stated objectives of the strategic communications plan and to raise awareness of the activities of the CBP as a national and international leader in multi-agency, multi-organizational ecosystem restoration efforts. This outreach seeks to engage and involve under-represented and under-served communities and ensures an equitable distribution of information and materials that reach beyond the traditional outlets for CBP restoration information.

Deliverables:

- Meet the following engagement rates across current social media platforms:
 - Facebook: 0.8%
 - Instagram: 1.3%
 - LinkedIn: 6%
 - X (formerly Twitter): 0.125%
- Six (6) percent of web traffic each year to chesapeakebay.net comes from our social media platforms.

- One (1) public summary per year on the work of the CBP and progress toward meeting the goals and outcomes of the *Watershed Agreement*.
- Maintain a list of subject matter experts across the partnership and update accordingly.
- Sponsor two (2) conferences or events on behalf of the CBP annually.
- Hold at least six (6) webinars for the interested public and partners each year.
- In coordination with other watershed entities, provide resources in the form of staffing, knowledge and collaboration for at least two (2) public forums each year.
- Engagement with and participation in regular Stewardship GIT meetings.
- Engagement with and participation in Local Leadership Workgroup meetings.
- Coordinate one (1) Chesapeake Executive Council meeting per year.
- Coordinate one (1) event for partners in celebration of the Chesapeake Bay Program's 40th anniversary.



Internal Communications Audit—Findings

The CBP Communications Office undertook an internal communications audit in 2022 to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of our communications and outreach products and services, as well as provide a baseline for this strategic communications plan. The audit findings identify the primary function of each communications component, how effective they have been and what opportunities exist to improve success.

The goals of the internal audit were, as follows:

- Determine the extent to which communications efforts are promoting the work of the partnership.
- Determine the extent to which communications efforts are helping to achieve the goals and outcomes of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement.
- Identify a use case for each communications effort and determine whether it should be documented or updated (i.e., remind the CBP Communications Office why certain actions are taken).
- Assess the strengths and weaknesses of communications efforts, including evaluation of a project's goals, messaging, design and audience engagement.
- Identify gaps and opportunities for future communications efforts including topics to focus on, potential audiences and improvements in products and workflow.

The following communications and outreach products and services were evaluated:

- Content on chesapeakebay.net.
- Social media platforms.
- Newsletters.
- Press engagement.
- Print products.
- Events and webinars.
- Multimedia products.

To assess communications and outreach products and services, the following tools were used:

- Google Analytics.
- Content Quality Score.
- Analytics offered through search engine research software (e.g., Moz).
- Analytics offered through social media platforms and Mailchimp.
- Observations.

The internal communications audit offered the following opportunities for the CBP Communications Office moving forward.

- **Produce specific guidelines and strategies as needed:** Communications programs, projects and large-scale products (e.g., videos, conference exhibits) should have a strategy prior to their development. Additionally, documented standards are needed for print and photography products.
- **Create a strategy for keeping web content on chesapeakebay.net up-to-date:** The CBP Communications Office is responsible for maintaining and creating all content

on chesapeakebay.net, while the CBP Web Team is responsible for the architecture of the site and building new web pages. Content refers to all written, photo and video assets on the website. A content strategy will assist in keeping top-level web pages up-to-date. Consider updating Bay 101 videos that are 10 years or older.

- **Refine website to better highlight the work of the partnership:** The audit uncovered challenges between education vs. promotion of the partnership's work. Web pages can be updated to more clearly mention the goals and outcomes of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*, as well as the work of the advisory committees, GITs, workgroups and action teams, as applicable. Consider moving, removing and consolidating content to better highlight pages that speak to the work of the partnership.
- **Consider design and multimedia additions to high traffic web pages:** Enhance those web pages that receive consistent traffic with photography, graphic design, calls to action and embedded videos.
- **Experiment with new social media management:** The internal audit revealed the audiences that we struggle to reach, which is namely young adults. Evaluate the possibility of adding a new social media channel that is proven to reach younger audiences (e.g., Tik Tok). Consider updated grant deliverables and social media strategy goals to account for the popularity of Facebook/Instagram stories.
- **Produce evergreen posts for social media:** Create a repository of evergreen social media content to draw upon when time or content is limited.
- **Add and consolidate content on chesapeakebay.net:** Consider consolidating duplicative content, such as the "Issues" and "State of the Chesapeake" page to reduce content and better highlight partnership work. Create additional "Issues" pages and content for "How Tos and Tips".
- **Assist in the updating of CBP organizational web pages on chesapeakebay.net:** Current CBP organizational web pages (i.e., GIT and workgroup pages) are not meeting the needs of internal audiences. Consider undertaking a comprehensive assessment of the internal web pages on chesapeakebay.net and update as necessary.
- **Develop media relations:** Work with a media contractor to foster better engagement with media outlets, particularly in the headwaters states of the watershed. Develop targeted media lists for different announcements.

The full internal communications audit can be found in Appendix A on page 27.

Focus Group/Survey Findings

The CBP Communications Office contracted with The Hatcher Group to assist in conducting background research, which included one-on-one interviews and focus groups with various stakeholders. Additionally, The Hatcher Group conducted their own audit of the audience and content performance of CBP's social media. The social audit conducted by The Hatcher Group can be found in Appendix B on page 44, while the full *Key Findings Document* can be found in Appendix C on page 143.

Strengths

- Highly trusted, well-respected communications team.
 - The CBP Communications is a highly trusted, data-driven source for information about the Chesapeake Bay, its tributaries and the ecosystems surrounding it. The team has long been a resource for elected officials, partners and the media. The CBP Communications Office is one of the strongest and most reliable teams across the partnership and its work was highly regarded by nearly every stakeholder.
- Excel at communicating scientific, technical information.
 - The CBP Communications Office excels in providing information to those who work in and around clean water about the Bay's health and overall environmental protection. Specifically, advocates or those who work closely with the Bay TMDL felt that the team provided timely and relevant resources to help them further their work. Media stakeholders shared this view and consistently said the CBP Communications Office is extremely helpful and responds timely. Several stakeholders mentioned the CBP Communications Office are very talented and some of the best writers they've worked with.
- Produce high-quality materials.
 - The CBP Communications Office provides useful resources for GITs, partners, workgroups and staff. Nonprofit partners felt the Flickr account held excellent photos and the daily Bay News and weekly Bay Brief newsletters were extremely helpful.

Weaknesses

- High focus on water quality and toxic contaminants significantly outweigh other Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement goals and outcomes.
 - Stakeholders expressed concern about focusing too heavily on issues such as water quality and toxic contaminants, while putting less attention toward issues particularly impacting topics such as agriculture and forest health that may be of interest to audiences that live further from the Bay.
- Lack of internal communication and too many silos.
 - Stakeholders voiced concerns about a lack of internal communications and a need for more collaboration. Some stakeholders mentioned that the CBP Communications Office should focus on internal communications to coordinate with its partners and ensure everyone's voice is heard. Stakeholders outside of the direct Chesapeake Bay region felt that too many silos exist within the

partnership and more collaboration is needed internally for workgroups to be more effective. Some agency stakeholders mentioned that the Communications Office could collaborate more and just look online for story ideas, rather than adding another ask onto already time-strapped states.

- Unclear communications goals.
 - Many stakeholders noted that they were not clear of the Communications Office's goals and why they wanted to reach certain audiences.
- Mixed reviews of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice (DEIJ) communications.
 - Some stakeholders felt the Communications Office is doing an overall good job at communicating about DEIJ. Others had specific complaints about the partnership in general not focusing on the systemic issues at hand.

Opportunities

- Continue positive relationships.
 - Stakeholders stressed the importance of continuing positive relationships with elected officials and media also cited positive relationships with the CBP Communications Office.
- Shape the narrative for “Reaching 2025” *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement* outcomes to gain more trust.
 - Many stakeholders felt the Communications Office has the opportunity to communicate transparently about Bay restoration progress to date. Others agreed that the Communications Office should focus on its accomplishments while also advocating for future progress to meet its outcomes and take accountability for the outcomes it did not meet. Stakeholders mentioned that negative messaging and continually highlighting where outcomes come up short can disengage potential volunteers, advocates or new audiences. On the other hand, the media stressed the need to be transparent.
- Prioritize internal communication, coordination and collaboration to advance Chesapeake Bay goals.
 - Stakeholders felt that the CBP Communications Office should focus its efforts on internal communications to continually connect with federal, regional, state and local partners. In terms of DEIJ, stakeholders suggested that the Communications Office focus on internal communications to ensure partners and leadership understand what the partnership offers and how to work together more effectively.
- Communicate about co-benefits of Chesapeake Bay work.
 - Many stakeholders mentioned the opportunity to communicate more about multiple benefits of achieving Bay restoration goals. It's critical to connect economic benefits to environmental benefits, as well as keeping in mind that water quality impacts every community, but every community is not directly thinking of the Bay. Some stakeholders mentioned that the CBP Communications Office should work harder to promote local benefits of water quality.
- Bring geographic diversity into communications.

- Stakeholders noted that geographic diversity is needed more than racial and ethnic diversity when it comes to ensuring that the CBP Communications Office accurately reflects all audiences across the watershed.
- Reach younger audiences.
 - Many stakeholders mentioned that younger audiences are not as engaged as older audiences, which may isolate them from understanding what they are inheriting.
- “Give credit” for work across the Chesapeake Bay watershed.
 - Some stakeholders mentioned that some partners often try to “own” projects and focus on their interests, which impacts collaboration. Other stakeholders felt that CBP takes credit for a project when it should be going to particular organizations. The CBP Communications Office has the opportunity to build goodwill with partners by citing them in communications materials, asking them to disseminate materials and adding their efforts to the particular communication.

Threats

- Capacity.
 - Every stakeholder mentioned that the CBP Communications Office is spread too thin and is understaffed to keep up with being proactive, strategic or intentional about communicating CBP’s work. Stakeholders mentioned the desire for a larger Communications Office which would then be able to tackle a larger scope of skills and work, including on-the-ground outreach or community organizing. Many stakeholders mentioned that the Communications Office gets stuck doing work that doesn’t belong to them, such as the “Reaching 2025” report, or does not see the value of certain outreach events, such as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.
- Identity.
 - Almost every stakeholder associated the CBP Communications Office with the EPA Chesapeake Bay Program Office, which often seems to have a negative connotation. Many stakeholders were unaware that other federal agencies also have Chesapeake Bay offices. Some stakeholders mentioned that many audiences are unaware of the CBP, calling it “invisible.”

Goals & Tactics

Using the findings from the surveys and focus groups, along with the internal audit, The Hatcher Group developed a set of strategic recommendations to guide the work of the CBP Communications Office over the next several years, while accounting for the identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats listed in the previous section. The CBP Communications Office then worked together as a team to review and edit these recommendations. The result is four recommendations, each with four tactics in which to achieve said recommendations.

It must be noted that this strategic communications plan refresh is happening at a pivotal moment for the partnership. The majority of the *Watershed Agreement* outcomes have a target completion date of 2025; a steering committee was formed in 2023 to recommend the next steps in Bay restoration; and the CBP will be restructuring over the next year in response to an organizational assessment that occurred in early 2024. The CBP Communications Office expects to be involved in many of these efforts, but since the specific functions and level of effort needed to support these initiatives is still unknown at this time, this strategic communications strategy has intentionally been kept high-level.

As a communications office, we feel these final recommendations are achievable by us as a team, will help streamline our current processes and work, complement our current cooperative agreement deliverables and help progress the goals and outcomes of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*.

Recommendation One: Strengthen internal communications across the partnership.

Inconsistent internal communication has long been a weakness of the CBP. With partners representing a diverse set of organizations, from academia to all levels of government agencies to nonprofit organizations, that are spread across a 64,000-square-mile watershed, it is difficult, if not close to impossible, for everyone to stay up-to-date on what is happening throughout the partnership. The CBP Communications Office does not take complete responsibility for ensuring internal communications success, as it is the responsibility of the entire partnership. However, the below tactics are intended to assist in its improvement.

- **Tactic One:** Develop a regular schedule in which the CBP Communications Office will meet with representatives from GITs, workgroups and action teams to better understand what they are working on to achieve their *Watershed Agreement* outcomes, and how the CBP Communications Office can assist them with any communication and outreach needs may arise from this work. If the identified needs fall outside of the communications and outreach arena, they will be referred to the Strategic Engagement Team for further guidance. (*Note: The CBP Communications Office does not intend to assist every entity with every communications need, but rather looking for trends, noting changing priorities and assessing where our team can be the most effective and efficient.*)

- What does success look like? Meeting with each advisory committee, GIT, relevant workgroups and action teams at a minimum of once a year through the life cycle of the CBP Communications Office cooperative agreement. Success for this tactic is dependent on the results of the survey described in Tactic 2, which will provide insight into whether these meetings are deemed useful for our internal audiences in meeting their communications and outreach needs and priorities.
- **Tactic Two:** Solicit annual feedback from members of the Management Board, advisory committees, GITs, workgroups and action teams to gain a better understanding of communications objectives, needs and opportunities. This feedback will also help the CBP Communications Office to understand which of their efforts are working, which need more support and which should end.
 - What does success look like? At least a 40% response rate to the initial feedback questionnaire the CBP Communications Office will send out; rising to at 60% by the end of the CBP Communications Office cooperative agreement.
- **Tactic Three:** Provide annual communications training to the partnership based on identified needs from the feedback obtained in Recommendation One, Tactic Two.
 - What does success look like? Representation from each GIT, advisory committee, relevant workgroups and actions teams, and leadership at each communications training, to ensure the training is received partnership-wide and not just by other communications and outreach professionals.
- **Tactic Four:** Begin sending weekly “Top Things You Need to Know” email to partnership to foster internal communication while an assessment of our current newsletters is taking place.
 - What does success look like? At least a 60% open rate for each email sent.

Recommendation Two: Streamline communications processes to enhance capacity.

The CBP Communications Office is small but mighty. Our team cannot take on every communications need in the partnership, on top of branding, media outreach, event planning and meeting grant deliverables. Finding a way to maximize our capacity while continuing to provide excellent customer service is pressing need for the CBP Communications Office.

- **Tactic One:** Using partnership feedback and other internal assessments, revise newsletters as necessary and encourage more partners to subscribe to foster greater internal communication opportunities.
 - What does success look like? At least 20 new individuals from Chesapeake Bay Program partner organizations subscribe to either Chesapeake Currents, Bay Brief and/or Bay News annually through the life of the current CBP Communications Office cooperative agreement.

- **Tactic Two:** Work with CBP Web Team to determine what other communications and outreach services could be added to the “[Web Development and Support Page](#)” to streamline requests, or develop our own Communications Page to provide a one-stop shop for CBP communications resources.
 - **What will success look like?** If and when a Communications Page on chesapeakebay.net is established, Google analytics, feedback from the annual questionnaire described in Recommendation One, Tactic Two and the number of requests received for assistance on the website will determine how much value this webpage is bringing to the partnership.
- **Tactic Three:** Develop SOPs that document established communications and outreach activities.
 - **What will success look like?** By the end of Year 4 of the current cooperative agreement, at least five SOPs for CBP Communications Office processes will be written and made available as needed.
- **Tactic Four:** Develop talking points for relevant topics impacting the Bay and make them available to the partnership. Use the feedback obtained in Recommendation One, Tactic Two to determine what topics talking points would be needed for.
 - **What will success look like?** By the end of Year 4 of the current CBP Communications Office cooperative agreement, two sets of talking points on various topics determined as a critical need by the partnership will be written and made available. These talking points will be determined through the results of the questionnaire in Recommendation One, Tactic Two, current events and Chesapeake watershed issues. These topics will be separate from the Beyond 2025 effort.

Recommendation Three: Strengthen relationships with primary audiences to expand the Chesapeake Bay’s impact across the watershed.

As stated in the Audiences section of this strategic communications plan, the CBP Communications Office considers members of the CBP partnership, media, students, teachers and the interested public as our primary audiences. Understanding the communications and outreach needs and priorities of our partners, as well as what the media is reporting, and what the interested public, students and teachers are looking to consume, will assist our team in better defining our communications priorities and goals, which in turn will help strengthen our relationship with these audiences.

- **Tactic One:** Working with the CBP Outreach Specialist, develop a process to disseminate Communications Office content, as well as information about CBP tools, initiatives and services to state and county-level groups to bring awareness to a variety of audiences (e.g., local governments, farmers, diversity outreach organizations).
 - **What does success look like?** Putting a process in place to disseminate priority information from the partnership to networks established by the CBP Outreach Specialist. Once in place, this process will be used at a minimum of two times and then informal feedback will be collected by the CBP Outreach Specialist.

- **Tactic Two:** Hold quarterly social media strategy meetings to identify priority messages within the partnership and produce relevant content for targeted audiences.
 - **What will success look like?** By the end of year 4 of the CBP Communications Office cooperative agreement, at a minimum of two social media strategy meetings will be held to produce relevant content for targeted audiences. Social media metrics will be used to assess growth in social media engagement during the times when the content developed during these strategy meetings are used.
- **Tactic Three:** Schedule bi-annual meetings with federal and state agency communications leads to share ideas and enhance relationships.
 - **What will success look like?** By the end of year 4 schedule at least one meeting of federal and state agency communications leads. During the meeting, solicit feedback on the usefulness of these sessions to guide a regular meeting schedule.
- **Tactic Four:** Set up a Chesapeake Bay Watershed Communications Professionals listserv to further connections with other watershed communications professionals to share information, events, jobs, internships, etc.
 - **What will success look like?** Add at least five new watershed communications professionals to the listserv annually through the life of the CBP Communications Office cooperative agreement and encourage use of the listserv to share information.

Recommendation Four: Expand knowledge of the partnership’s work and use of tools, data and information.

Using the below tactics to expand knowledge of the partnership and share information about CBP’s tools, data and information will continue to chip away at our perceived identity issue, while recognizing partners for their contributions to the CBP and promoting the work and skill sets of the CBP Communications Office.

- **Tactic One:** Promote CBP’s video and photo archive through targeted social media posts, on [Chesapeake Network](#) (hosted by the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay) and at communications trainings, webinars and conferences.
 - **What will success look like?** The CBP Multimedia Manager will develop a process for marketing the CBP video and photo archive and assess progress through the number of requests received to use visual content, as well as track the number of visitors to our Flickr site.
- **Tactic Two:** Utilize money set aside in current grant to hire a media contractor to help pitch stories and develop relationships with media in headwater states.
 - **What will success look like?** When a media contractor is engaged, success will be measured through the growth in relationships with smaller newspaper outlets and those in headwater states, including how often partnership work is featured in these media outlets.

- **Tactic Three:** Ensure at least one CBP Communications Office webinar per year highlights a new CBP tool or initiative.
 - **What will success look like?** One webinar per year will feature a new CBP tool or initiative with at least 50 people attending.
- **Tactic Four:** Work with the Strategic Engagement Team to help identify opportunities where the partnership's work can be shared with our audiences. This may include the recommendation of conferences where folks can present, new groups to engage with to raise awareness of a CBP tool or organizations to collaborate with on a certain initiative.
 - **What will success look like?** Work with Strategic Engagement Team members to develop databases of available conferences, universities, funding opportunities and other desired resources that can be made readily available to partners when needed. Success will be measured by the number of partners that ask for these resources.



Next Steps & Plan Updates

The CBP Communications Office considers this communications strategic plan to be a living document and will update the recommendations and tactics as needed. Progress toward meeting the recommendations and tactics will be assessed on an annual basis and edits will be made accordingly.

The CBP Communications Office will continue to define appropriate performance metrics for each of the tactics listed under the four recommendations as work evolves. Each year, the CBP Communications Office will report on progress made toward achieving the actions listed in this plan to the CBP Management Team and EPA Project Officer for the Communication's Office cooperative grant.

It is recommended that this plan be refreshed completely after the next phase of Bay restoration is put into place (i.e., after the Beyond 2025 recommendations are fully implemented) to account for changes in partnership structure, revisions to the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement and priority shifts.





Chesapeake Bay Program Internal Communications Audit

Conducted by CBP Communications Office staff
Results gathered February through April 2022
Report finalized June 10, 2022

Introduction

From February through April 2022, the Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) Communications Office conducted an internal examination of communications products created over the past five years, including web content, social media, newsletters, press releases, events, webinars, multimedia and print products. This audit was conducted by staff members of the Communications Office in order to determine the communications strengths and weaknesses and to provide a baseline for the creation of a Strategic Communications Plan. The findings in this report identify the primary function of each communications component, how effective they have been and what opportunities exist for improved success.

Goals of the Communications Audit

1. Determine the extent to which communications efforts are promoting the work of the CBP.
2. Determine the extent to which communications efforts are helping to achieve the goals and outcomes of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*.
3. Identify a use case for each communications effort and determine whether it should be documented or updated (i.e., remind ourselves why we do certain things)
4. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of communications efforts including evaluation of a project's goals, messaging, design and audience engagement.
5. Identify gaps and opportunities for future communications efforts including topics to focus on, potential audiences, and improvements in products and workflow.

Questions Asked

1. How have we informed the interested public about our work?
2. How does this support the goals and outcomes of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*?
3. Who are our key audiences and do we reach them with the right messages?
4. Are the visuals on-brand, modern and serving a purpose?
5. What communications have been most effective?
6. How has this content been disseminated beyond our own channels? (i.e., press releases getting picked up, videos used on other websites, blogs shared in newsletters). Was it effective? What opportunities did we miss?
7. Have our communications products highlighted partners and represented the CBP as a partnership?
8. Do workflow issues exist? (i.e., deadlines getting pushed, redundant work, conflicting direction)
9. How does the performance compare to industry averages or other organizations? (i.e., are we producing more or less content? Are we getting more or less engagement?)
10. Have we used storytelling effectively to show why our work is important?
11. Does this help to communicate the "why" behind our work?

Tools Used

1. Google Analytics.
2. Content Quality Score.
3. Analytics offered through search engine research software, Moz.
4. Analytics offered through social media platforms and MailChimp.
5. Observations.

Key Findings and Observations

WEBSITE CONTENT

The Communications Office performed an audit of Chesapeakebay.net, the partnership's flagship website, focusing on the seven sections of the site: Discover the Chesapeake, Learn the Issues, State of the Chesapeake, Take Action, In the News, Who We Are and What We Do. For this audit, we used data taken from 2016-2021, as well as a current assessment of content, to assess how each section is functioning and meeting desired partnership goals. The report includes top findings for each section and recommendations from the Communications Office.

Metrics & Definitions

Content Quality Score: Content Quality Scores are given to web pages based on a series of criteria, including readability, scannability, multimedia, redundancy, outdatedness, relevance, and delivery on promise. They range from 1-7, with 7 being the highest quality. This data comes from the website audit and inventory conducted in 2021.

Moz: A software that provides information about how webpages are being found via search engines, such as Google.

Page views: A page view is when a user interacts with the content on a webpage, regardless of having gotten to it from social media, email, web search or another channel.

Adjusted page views: Taking the page views of a section and dividing them by the total number of pages to see how popular the entire section is.

Bounce rate: When a user visits one page of your website and leave without visiting any other parts of the website.

Evergreen: Evergreen pages are ones where the information is not time-sensitive and we can expect return visitors throughout the year.

Section	Adjusted page view	Percent of page views
Learn the Issues	79,573	55.7%
What we Do	19,631	13.5%
State of the Chesapeake	16,307	11.6%
Discover the Chesapeake	13,800	9.2%
Take Action	10,400	7%
Who We Are	3,400	2.3%
In the News	856	.6%

Table 1: Adjusted page views for chesapeakebay.net

Discover the Chesapeake

Discover the Chesapeake includes educational content about the Chesapeake Bay watershed related to history, geology, ecosystems and significant water quality issues. When accounting for adjusted page views, the section brought in 9.2% of the total website page views between 2016-2021 (4th most amount). Because of the Field Guide (which includes 334 webpages and growing), this section includes the second most pages (behind In the News) and brings in the most *total* page views.

When accounting for adjudged page views, the top five pages/sections of Discover the Chesapeake are Watershed, Facts & Figures, Ecosystem, Bay 101 and Field Guide. A key finding is that the Watershed and Facts & Figures pages received more views than any other landing page on the site, besides “chesapeakebay.net/issues”. According to Moz, our Watershed page holds the #2 rank on the Internet for the search term “Chesapeake Bay Watershed” nation-wide. Google Analytics shows that the average amount of time visitors spend on both pages is sufficient, though their bounce rates are on the [higher side](#), indicating that users aren’t exploring the site further once they access the initial web page.

Page	Adjusted page views	Time on page	Bounce Rate
Watershed	202,754	04:13	63.92%
Facts & Figures	189,010	05:29	70.80%
Ecosystem	69,595	03:53	74.48%
Bay 101	19,085	03:09	62.99%
Field Guide	9,319	01:59	77.57%

Table 2: Adjusted page views for Discover the Chesapeake

Though the single Watershed page accounts for more annual page views than any single Field Guide entry, the Field Guide is still a valuable asset. The section brought in 3,112,664 total page views between 2016-2021 (518,777) annually, which is significantly higher than In the News, which brought in only 1,413,217 total page views between 2016-2021 despite having more than four times the number of pages. Additionally, Bay 101 videos generated almost a half million page views between 2016-2021, roughly 83,300 views a year. These video pages receive above-average comments and have considerable value as communications products.

Discover the Chesapeake received the 2nd highest Content Quality Score. The lowest score was Readability, with only 39% of the pages written at an 8th grade reading level.

Recommendations:

- Consider enhancing high-performing pages such as Watershed and Facts & Figures with multimedia and calls-to-action.

- Refine Field Guide pages and develop a plan for keeping them up-to-date.

Learn the Issues

Learn the Issues is the section of our website dedicated to topics related to the health of the Bay and its wildlife. When accounting for adjusted page views, Learn the Issues brings in the most traffic of all seven sections by far: a whopping 55.7%. With only 25 pages, the section received 1,989,340 page views between 2016-2021. The top five pages were: Learn the Issues (main page) Blue crabs, Oysters, Invasive species, Air pollution and Agriculture. The fact that the *Issues* landing page receives more page views than the individual child pages is unique; in no other section of the site does this happen. This indicates that the page acts as a vital entry point to the website: when users search “problems in the Chesapeake Bay” the page is a primary result.

Page	Page views	Time on page	Bounce Rate
Issues	513,608	3:44	61.43%
Blue crabs	131,009	4:34	73.32%
Oysters	124,510	5:13	77.22%
Invasive species	108,521	4:41	68.95%
Air pollution	91,114	4:38	68.26%

Table 3: Google analytics for Learn the Issues

Issues pages have high bounce rates, indicating that users do not explore the site further after getting the information they want. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it shows that while we have a reader’s attention, it’s important to deliver them the messages we want, such as information related to the Chesapeake Bay Program’s restoration efforts. On most *Issues* pages, there is a section at the bottom for “Current restoration goals” in which we discuss our work toward meeting goals and outcomes of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*, but this information is absent on pages such as Agriculture or Stormwater Runoff. On pages where that information does exist, such as Wetlands or Blue Crabs, it is only in a short paragraph at the bottom of the page.

Issues received the lowest Content Quality Score, which, combined with the amount of traffic it drives, indicates that updating this section should be a priority. The section received relatively low scores in multimedia (mostly due to a lack of media and an abundance of text), outdatedness (due to the auditors reviewing the section before the Communications Office updated it), redundancy (due to pages such as Blue Crabs, Oysters and Wetlands covering the same topics as State of the Chesapeake pages) and delivers on its promise (because pages often miss “status” information that’s saved for State of the Chesapeake pages).

It's recommended that we update these pages with more information and helpful media, and that we update them on a more regular basis. This is especially important because these pages are from time-to-time used by members of the media: Moz data shows that *Issues* pages such as Blue Crabs, Agriculture and Oysters have been cited by publications such as the *Washington Post*, *Huffington Post* and *Baltimore Sun*. It's also recommended that we combine duplicate *Issues* and *State* pages which would resolve content quality issues and improve the user experience (because users would have one page to find the info they want and not two). This would likely also have a positive effect on the section's search engine optimization. The Search Engine Journal warns content managers against "[Keyword cannibalization](#)" in which two or more pages are ranking for the same term and thus reducing the amount of traffic for each. Having a Blue Crabs *Issues* page and a Blue Crabs *State* page is a prime example of this.

Recommendations:

- Combine duplicate pages on Learn the Issues and State of the Chesapeake.
- Incorporate frequent updates into the Content Strategy.
- Consider editing pages to more clearly highlight relevant Chesapeake Bay Program restoration work and *Watershed Agreement* connections.

State of the Chesapeake

State of the Chesapeake is the section of the website that provides up-to-date information about the status of high profile topics, most of which are outcomes of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*. Between 2016-2021, State of the Chesapeake accounted for about 11.6% of the adjusted page views. Similar to Learn the Issues, State of the Chesapeake covers high-profile issues that you would expect to receive significant search traffic and clicks from visitors to our homepage. However, in comparison, *State* receives far fewer adjusted page views than *Issues* (11.6% to 55.7%). With the exception of Blue Crabs, the section's five highest trafficked pages between 2016-2021 do not have a duplicate page on *Issues*, indicating that duplicate pages are not only redundant but are less popular.

Page	Page views	Time on page	Bounce Rate
Pollution	53,832	4:16	65.68%
Dead Zone	31,568	2:59	72.02%
Blue Crabs	30,919	2:36	61.48%
Bald Eagles	21,908	2:25	80.28%
Litter	18,318	3:44	65.87%

Table 4: Google analytics for State of the Chesapeake

The lower bounce rate on Blue Crabs may indicate that users are inspired to explore more content, though it could also be that after users read through the page, they're leaving for the

other Blue Crabs page which has much more information. During scans of the page text, we found that *State* pages are not always hitting on primary messages. As representations of *Watershed Agreement* outcomes, these pages should mention the *Watershed Agreement* and applicable workgroups, but are not always doing so. Additionally, these pages could be enhanced by making more mention of specific partners involved in the work as to represent us as a partnership; however, this could also overwhelm readers and complicate the primary message.

Overall, *State of the Chesapeake* was tied for *Issues* with the lowest Content Quality Score, suffering from the same issues of high redundancy and not delivering on the user promise. Combining content will alleviate these issues—and the *State* pages should fold into the *Issues* pages because the *Issues* pages are currently driving in much more traffic to the website. However, design content on *State* pages are highly effective and should be transferred over.

Recommendations:

- Remove duplicate pages and add information/graphics into the matching *Issues* pages.
- Review text to find opportunities to mention the *Watershed Agreement*, relevant workgroups or partners

Take Action

Take Action is the part of our site dedicated to giving audiences ways to put their love of the Bay into action. This could be adopting environmentally friendly practices, joining a watershed group, visiting a public access site or signing up for one of our newsletters. Between 2016-2021, Take Action accounted for about 7% of the adjusted page views, the 5th highest. Looking at the top five pages, we can see clearly that the How To's & Tips are by far that most popular page, which demonstrates that users are looking for this type of actionable stewardship content, as opposed to signing up for a newsletter or visiting a public access site. However, How To's & Tips has a relatively lower time on page and higher bounce rate, indicating that users could not be finding what they are looking for.

Page	Page views	Time on page	Bounce Rate
How To's & Tips	136,432	02:01	79.99%
Attend an Event	18,901	02:12	62.85%
Find a Group	9,369	02:02	71.44%
Visit the Chesapeake	6,549	02:25	74.46%
Newsletter	5,960	01:50	72.20%

Table 5: Google analytics for Take Action

When analyzing the websites of similar organizations, we found that similar “Take Action” sections focus solely on stewardship practices (as opposed to newsletters and recreation) and often only a few vital ones sanctioned by the organization. It should be noted that within the entire Take Action section, the stewardship actions promoted most by the partnership, such as installing rain gardens, maintaining a natural shoreline and planting trees, are either not included or crowded out by the plethora of content.

Take Action received the highest Content Quality Score of 5.9, due to high scores in Readability, Redundancy and Outdatedness. However, when the Communications Office reviewed the section, we found areas to improve photography and text. Several of the cards on the How To’s & Tips pages use blatant stock photography, which is not considered a best practice. Industry staple 99Design [wrote](#) that “eye-tracking studies show that stock photos are largely ignored compared to photos of real people, suggesting that modern human beings have developed a sort of “sixth sense” when it comes to distinguishing stock from custom images.” Text throughout the section could also be updated to better highlight CBP work.

Recommendations:

- Consider higher priority actions to include on How To’s & Tips.
- Update photography to meet CBP standards.

In the News

In the News is the section of the website where we produce weekly blogs related to CBP work and various Chesapeake Bay-related topics. When accounting for adjusted page views, the section brought in just .6% of traffic, the lowest of all the sections. However, this section also has by far the most pages (over 1,500 and growing) and many of these blogs are not evergreen and should therefore not be expected to receive return visits.

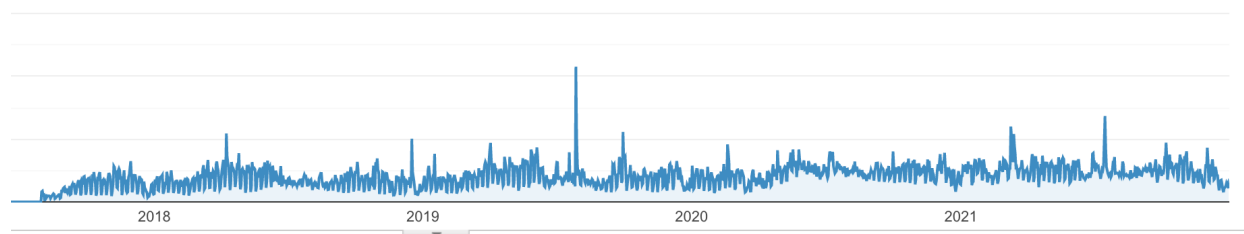
Looking at the top five blogs between 2016-2021 according to page views (shown below), a clear pattern emerges regarding the type of content that receives return traffic. The blogs are all evergreen and seek to answer a question that one might type into a search engine. A blog such as “Are there sharks in the Bay?” draws in around 11,200 page views each year. These findings show that we should treat these types of blogs the same way we treat *Issues* or *State* pages, in that we continuously update them with new information and design elements. Keeping our most popular evergreen blogs up to date is just as important as producing new content.

Page	Page views	Time on page	Bounce Rate
Are there sharks in the Bay?	67,262	05:00	89.98%
Ten invasive species of the Chesapeake Bay	53,557	05:00	72.71%
Is the Chesapeake Bay fresh or salty?	29,225	04:33	85.06%

Why is the Chesapeake Bay so important?	29,255	05:57	66.89%
10 Chesapeake Bay native plants to plant in your yard this spring	23,556	02:21	73.75%

Table 6: Top blogs by page views

Non-evergreen blogs are also vital because they keep our social media and newsletters fresh. On channels such as Facebook, new blogs continue to result in our most successful posts, indicating that there is still a demand for written content. Between 2016-2021, the blog has maintained similar levels of traffic (shown below), despite industry warnings that video content would greatly surpass written content. This could be due to the level of effort we put into the blog. When comparing our blog to ones from similar organizations, we found that CBP blogs shine in regard to their creative elements such as titles, topics, quotes and original photography. Furthermore, the history of blog production at the CBP continues to pay off as many of our top performing blogs were written in 2016 or earlier.



Graph 1: Page views to In the News from 2018-2021.

When reviewing In the News, we noted that an opportunity exists to use blogs as a partnership-wide communication tactic. When workgroups and Goal Implementation Teams (GITs) want to accomplish a communications goal, they often turn to factsheets, videos or new web products. However, a blog created to inspire a particular action, such as planting trees or maintaining a wetland, and then advertised over social media could be just as effective as other communications tactics while potentially requiring less effort. Considering that the Communications Office has considerable expertise in this domain, it also makes sense as an avenue for workgroups and GITs to consider.

Recommendations:

- Create a process for keeping high traffic evergreen blogs up to date.
- Augment high-traffic evergreen blogs with visual content, similar to *State* pages.
- Consider writing and advertising blogs to meet specific workgroup goals.

Who We Are

Who We Are is the section of chesapeakebay.net dedicated to informative content about the partnership, its members and its staff. Between 2016–2021, the section accounted for about

2.3% of the adjusted page views, the 6th highest. How this section's traffic compares to other sections on this section is not too important of a measure, because the pages are considerably less topical than other sections (think Job Openings compared to Blue Crabs). A review of the top five pages by page views shows that the section is used mostly for internal purposes.

Page	Page views	Time on page	Bounce Rate
Groups	161,505	1:56	50.98%
How We Are Organized	32,651	0:42	26.63%
Meetings Archive	27,794	0:23	26.25%
Job Openings	26,904	2:19	85.68%
Office Staff	23,702	3:19	78.69%

Table 7: Google analytics for Who We Are

Who We Are received a 4.6 Content Quality Score, which was below the site-wide average of 5.4. Pages such as *How We're Organized* were flagged as not meeting their purpose—the page includes a simple chart that does not do enough to explain the partnership's complex structure. Seeing as how this page has a short time-on-page and low bounce rate, it is likely being used internally to navigate to committee, GIT and board pages. Auditors noted that *Office Staff*, *Who's Who* and *How We're Organized* could all potentially be combined, which would result in users finding the information they need more quickly.

It should be noted that individual group pages, which collectively account for the most traffic in this section, are not always satisfying our internal audiences, according to anecdotal feedback. Undertaking an update of these pages should be done.

Recommendations:

- Undergo a comprehensive design and user experience update of the internal pages that are not meeting internal audience needs.
- Consider combining *Office Staff*, *Who's Who* and *How We're Organized*.
- Update *How We're Organized* with text explaining the chart.

What We Do

What We Do is the section of chesapeakebay.net dedicated to informative content about the work of the CBP. The section accounted for 13.5% of the adjusted page views, the 2nd highest amount. However, by looking at the top pages we can see that internal content is receiving the most attention. The Accomplishments page drew in a meager 4,182 views between 2016-2021, about 697 views a year. This is a sign for improvement, considering that the Accomplishments page contains the clearest information about CBP achievements and highlight work (truly answering the question: What do we do?).

Page	Page views	Time on page	Bounce Rate
Meetings calendar	344,962	02:33	70.71%
Maps	122,739	01:16	48.13%
Publications	80,582	1:45	73.69%
Programs & Projects	50,510	02:07	60.61%
What Guides Us	45,713	03:15	66.26%

Table 8: Google analytics for What We Do

The section received a Content Quality score of 4.6, with its Relevance and Deliver on Promise being on the lower end. When comparing this to similar sections on the websites of other organizations, we found that the focus on these webpages was solely to highlight work done by the organization. It was not crowded by pages such as Meetings Calendar or Publications, Data & Maps. That is not to say these resources are unimportant, but it points to the challenge of highlighting our work when so much other content is displayed. Even the location of this page (last in the navigation menu) indicates that the website prioritizes general educational content over content related to what the partnership does. Research [shows](#) that when exploring a website, users start left to right with the top navigation bar.

Another challenge identified through our audit was how best to promote that work under Programs & Projects. This content, which covers efforts such as Modeling, Monitoring and Quality Assurance, are the cornerstone of the Bay Program partnership, and exemplify how we unify various restoration efforts and instill collaboration. However, members of the public might have a more difficult time seeing the impact of this work, than with efforts such as managing the blue crab harvest or coordinating oyster reef restoration. This section might require more text to indicate that these are the more “behind the scenes” partnership work that allows for more on-the-ground efforts to occur. Additionally, on the Accomplishments page, accomplishments like oyster reefs, tree canopy and public access go unmentioned; the page itself has not been edited since 2019, and before that, 2017.

Recommendations:

- Update Accomplishments page to include more achievements from the partnership.
- Conduct research to determine if a separate website for internal resources should be developed, thereby prioritizing external messaging on chesapeakebay.net.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The CBP currently operates three social media channels, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The goals of these channels is to: 1) Build an audience and strengthen brand awareness; 2) Engage

users with our content and our mission; 3) Drive traffic to chesapeakebay.net and 4) Gain recognition as an expert and authority on the Chesapeake Bay and its watershed.

Audience growth

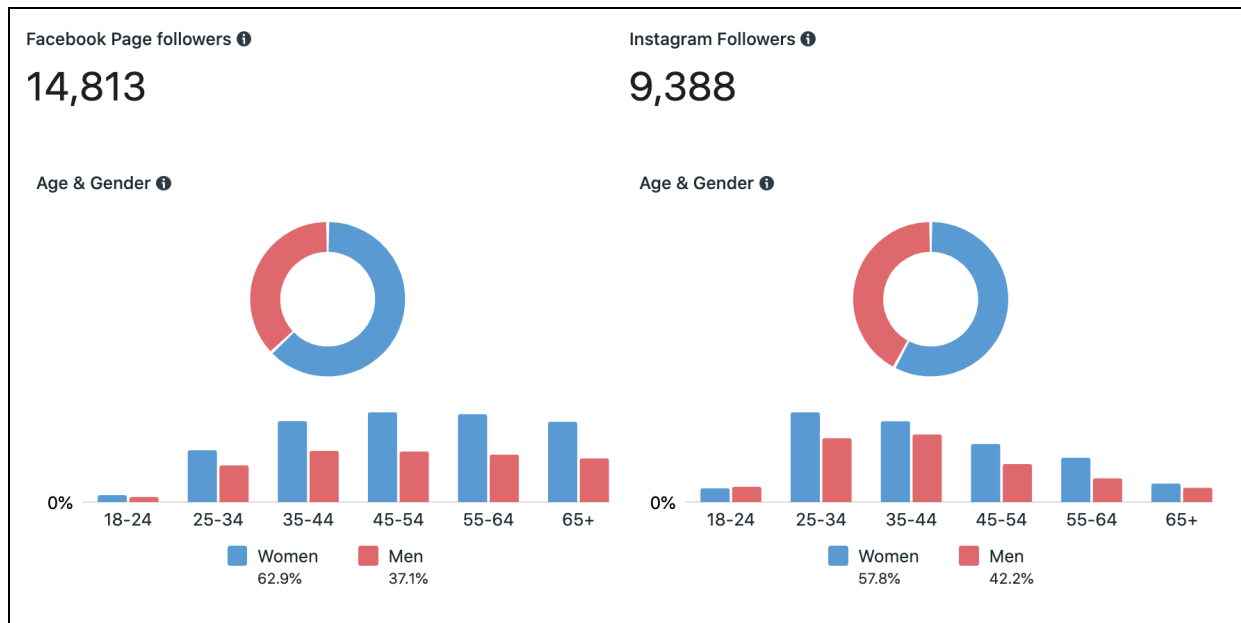
The CBP has significantly grown its audiences on all three channels between 2016–2021. Facebook grew from 2,642 likes in 2016 to 11,100 in 2021. Instagram grew from 1,939 followers in 2016 to 9,298 in 2021. Twitter started out with around 10,000 followers in 2016 and has grown steadily to 13,572 in 2021. The slow down of year-to-year audience growth indicates that it's increasingly difficult to grow our audiences, although we've yet to plateau and have certainly come a long way. The industry consensus is that all these channels are becoming "pay-to-play" media where your followers are less important than the money you're willing to spend on paid posts. However, the work we put in between 2016 and 2021 has given us a large enough audience to where we can surpass average engagement rates without boosting content.

Channel	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Facebook	2,642	5,158	7,150	8,933	10,908	11,100
Instagram	1,939	2,774	4,002	6,051	8,295	9,298
Twitter	N/A	10,103	11,148	12,243	13,098	13,572

Table 9: Follower growth for social media channels

Audience demographics

In general, our social channels are reaching folks between the ages of 25 and up. Audiences on Facebook are primarily 35-65+, with 62.9% identifying as female and 37.1% as male. On Instagram, the audience is slightly younger, mostly 25–44, with 57% as female and 42% as male. Twitter does not have audience demographics specific to our channel, but reports show that 38.5% of Twitter's [global audience](#) is between 25 and 34 years old, and 21% is between 35 and 49 years old, while the [worldwide gender](#) split is 62% male and 38% female.



Graph 2: Facebook and Instagram audience demographics

These findings indicate that the CBP is not reaching younger generations (25 years and younger) via social media. Channels such as TikTok and YouTube are more frequently used by younger audiences (note: while CBP maintains a YouTube channel, its management is not included within the social media strategy).

Engagement

Engagement rates on all channels are currently above industry averages. This is a significant feat considering that industry-wide, organic engagement on social media (particularly on Facebook and Twitter) is often mentioned as being “dead.” It’s been reported that Facebook especially wants brands to pay for advertising and therefore makes it more difficult for organic posts to do well. However, we have seen this disproven on our Facebook account, with posts far exceeding the average engagement rate.

Channel	Industry Avg. Engagement Rate (Social Insider)	2020 Engagement Rate
Facebook	.21%	1.38%
Instagram	1.08%	1.6%
Twitter	06%	.19%

Table 10: Engagement rate for social media channels

High performing posts

After looking at the top posts from each year between 2016 and 2021 on each channel, we've identified the type of stories that perform best. On Facebook, the most popular posts address stewardship tips, good news about the Bay, unique wildlife stories, Bay facts and gardening tips. On Twitter, the most popular posts tend to be more related to environmental science and conservation, such as statistics about wetlands and oysters, or wildlife stories about critters such as sharks and dolphins. On Instagram, the most popular posts feature wildlife and deliver good news in a timely manner.

Management

Between 2016 and 2021, we have stuck to a schedule of posting twice a day on Facebook, 3-4 times a day on Twitter and once a day on Instagram. This schedule is based on best practices, however, more testing could be done to see if we need to be posting as frequently as we do. Research from [Hootsuite](#) shows that typically, you should post to your feed twice a day on Facebook, 1-5 times a day on Twitter and 3-7 times a week on Instagram; which means we could conceivably post less on Instagram and Twitter without hurting our audience growth. Additionally, research shows that Instagram and Facebook favor channels that are using all of their tools, such as Facebook stories, Instagram stories, Instagram reels and IG TV. We've yet to consistently incorporate those functions into our management; mainly because we have no goal to hold ourselves accountable. Experimenting with less posts and more stories may give us more information about what our ideal balance is.

Recommendations:

- Make a list of blogs that perform well on Facebook and Twitter regardless of the time of year.
- Make a list of Chesapeake Bay and wildlife facts that perform well on Facebook and Twitter regardless of the time of year.
- Make time for "social media sprints" in which we create and schedule posts months in advance.
- For an extended period of time, make fewer posts and more stories/reels and see if there is a drop in engagement rate and audience growth.

NEWSLETTERS

The CBP has daily, weekly and monthly newsletters: Bay News, Bay Brief and Chesapeake Currents. The three newsletters provide us an opportunity to get our organization's news out, but just as importantly, they provide a meaningful service to our partners. The daily news stories in Bay News keep industry professionals up-to-date without having to search for the news themselves, while the funding, job opportunities and events promoted in Bay Brief help partners find grants or fill job vacancies. The newsletters were redesigned in 2016 and early 2017, though they continue to contain the same type of content, except for *Currents*, which slightly differs. The frequency with which we send them and the relative dates has not changed.

Growth

All three newsletters have grown consistently between 2016-2021, with the largest growth coming from Bay Brief, which nearly doubled its number of recipients. Sign-ups come from people visiting the Newsletter page on our website, during events when we offer a sign-up sheet and requests to be signed up over email. The redesigned newsletter did not appear to have an impact on the audience growth, and engagement rates can't be tracked beyond six months.

	2016 Recipients	2017 Recipients	2018 Recipients	2019 Recipients	2020 Recipients	2021 Recipients	Percent increase
Bay News	1,380	1,457	1,504	1,558	1,611	1,741	26.2%
Bay Brief	1,315	1,536	1,807	2,168	2,327	2,600	97.7%
Currents	1,604	1,755	1,882	2,071	2,120	2,279	42%

Table 11: Newsletter audience growth

Engagement

Mailchimp only provides your current open rate and click-through-rate and does not show how these rates change year-to-year. We pulled the rates from March, 2022 and compared this performance to the industry average in the “Non-profit” category. All three newsletters have a higher average open rate and a much higher average click through rate.

Newsletter	Average open rate	Average click through rate
Industry average	25.17%	2.79%
Bay News	32.3%	12.6%
Bay Brief	26.1%	10.8%
Chesapeake Currents	28.1%	6.9%

Table 12: Newsletter engagement rates

Audience

For all three newsletters, audiences tend to be those working in the environmental field. Even with *Currents*, which is our most public-facing email, the top audience members are from government and nonprofits. Reaching non-industry audiences, especially those who are high-school or college age, would require us to build an entirely new newsletter that is fully geared towards the public or finding ways to make *Currents* even more public-friendly.

Successful content

With Bay News, the content under “Headlines” tends to receive more clicks than those under “Opinions” and “Blogs.” With Bay Brief, the most clicked links are the CBP blogs and news

articles in the "What We're Reading" section. For Chesapeake Currents, positive news stories are opened more than other articles (e.g., "Celebrating DEIJ success" was opened more times than "Experts find average dead zone"). The tips and tricks are also popular, despite the CBP being short on custom content to populate this section.

Management

For Bay News, most opens occur one hour after sending, but there is no significant difference in time sent in relation to opens/clicks. For *Currents*, there is no significant correlation between time sent and open rate. If it is sent earlier in the afternoon, more people will open it before 5 p.m., if it is sent later in the afternoon, people will open it for the next 24 hours. The list of subscribers is difficult to manage because people are always changing jobs and losing old email addresses.

Recommendations:

- Incorporate a button on Bay News and Bay Brief for those who want to submit content to the newsletter.
- Consider how to encourage sign-ups in different communications touch points (events, social posts, blogs, etc.).
- Schedule annual or quarterly recipient list cleanup to get rid of outdated email addresses and email addresses from those who never open the newsletter.
- Produce more tips and tricks content to populate Chesapeake Currents.

PRESS & MEDIA

The CBP Communications Office handles media opportunities for the partnership. Between 2016 and 2021, the CBP issued between 8 and 10 press releases each year, mostly covering updates for outcomes of high popularity (e.g., blue crabs, SAV, oysters), our annual report Bay Barometer and the annual Chesapeake Executive Council meeting. Efforts are made to get media outlets to pick up these stories, including media calls (typically 1–2 a year), emails to a list of media organizations and social media promotions. We received 1,124 media pickups between 2016 and 2021, an average of 187 a year.

Growth

There is a slight pattern of growth in the number of press release pickups between 2016 and 2021, in that 2020 and 2021 were our highest years. The number of pickups more so depends on the type of stories available for us to cover, as opposed to a specific tactic taken by the Communications Office. Top pickups tend to be associated with major news events, such as the 2017 Executive Council Meeting where potential federal budget cuts were addressed, good news, such as SAV rebounding or improved water quality, and bad news, such as SAV loss and declining adult blue crab population.

Year	Press releases written	Media pickups	Biggest release (# of media
------	------------------------	---------------	-----------------------------

			pickups)
2016	9	198	ChesapeakeProgress (52)
2017	10	171	Blue crabs (58)
2018	8	138	Executive Council (30)
2019	9	152	Blue crabs (29) Bay Barometer (29)
2020	10	259	SAV (78)
2021	10	205	Chesapeake Bay Awareness Week (27)

Table 13: Press release pickups

Management

Media attention is limited outside of the CBP's own releases, as opposed to solicited quotes for news stories. Groups like the Chesapeake Bay Foundation or the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, which put out hundreds of press releases a year, work with public relations firms and have strong connections with media, often become the first source reporters go to when needing information about Bay-related topics. Working with a contractor to establish stronger media relationships is worth considering. Another challenge is working with partners on joint press releases. There have been times where partners announce work that the CBP was heavily involved in, without mentioning us or asking how we'd like to be included.

Recommendations:

- Consider creating targeted media lists for different announcements.
- More relationship building with media outlets is needed.
- Consider including more photography in press releases to encourage more pickups.

PRINT

Between 2016 and 2021, the CBP Communications Office produced a number of print products to support various communications goals. The annual Bay Barometer is the most consistent print product, though it was not printed in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic. State-based factsheets are produced alongside the Barometer, and between 2016 and 2018, we printed rack cards that highlighted key statistics from the Bay Barometer. The Communications Office has also worked with workgroups and GITs on specific print products. This includes work like the Hooked on Clean Water infographics which were dispersed during conferences and the Fish Consumption Advisory infographics which were made for the Toxic Contaminants Workgroup to use.

Prints produced in 2016–2021 (**still in print*)

CBP Brochure (English and Spanish)*	Fish consumption advisory infographic
Watershed Agreement*	Economic posters
Bay Barometer 2016-2019	Bay Backpack Brochure
Bay Barometer rack cards 2016-2018	Stewardship fact sheets
Bay Barometer state-by-state fact sheets 2016-2021	Environmental Literacy fact sheets
Hooked on Clean Water infographics	Outcome Attainability factsheets
Chesapeake Progress posters 2016-2018	Outdoor Recreation factsheets
Wetlands factsheet	

Table 14: Print products available

Limited data exists on the impact that these print products had other than anecdotal, though we are aware of print product needs. For example, educators and people hosting educational events will email us asking for print materials that cover general Chesapeake Bay topics, which indicates that developing rack cards would be beneficial. Having a version of our general Bay Program pamphlet written in Spanish was very effective during the recent Naturally Latinos Conference, which indicates more products could be translated into Spanish. To better analyze the success of print products, it's recommended that we set measurable goals and keep track of how many products are taken during events.

Whether by partnership with a contractor, relying on web team staff, or using fully internal resources, the Communications Office has demonstrated the ability to produce high quality print materials. However, the challenge is maintaining a thorough strategy from planning to production. In some instances, there hasn't been enough research regarding the audience of the product, specific goals to be measured and how the product will be dispersed. Design consistency between products can be challenging when they are made by different and new staff members as well as contractors.

Recommendations:

- Complete an audit of print product needs for event tables.
- Establish a process of designing print products, including defining a goal, audience, form of distribution and printing method.
- Develop a print product style guide.
- Identify more products to be translated into Spanish.

Events & Webinars

Between 2016 and 2021, the CBP Communications Office participated in 55 events, ranging from environmental sector conferences to community festivals. Our participation comes in the form of sponsorships, exhibits and booth management. These events give us the opportunity to

engage with a large audience and make personal connections with attendees. During the pandemic, many conferences became virtual and the Communications Office adapted to the new format. These engagements are time and resource intensive, requiring a staff member to manage an in-person or virtual booth during the time of the event. Our event attendance was highest between 2017 and 2019, but dropped during the start of the pandemic. The Communications Office also lost an outreach position in 2021, which significantly reduced the number of events we are able to attend.

Events attended					
2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
5	13	13	17	7	3

Table 15: Events attended from 2016-2021

An observational audit of our events indicates that formal documents are needed to ensure we are providing targeted messaging and meeting audience needs. This could include general CBP talking points, documented feedback about which print or virtual booth products were most used, new and updated print products, and materials and messages catered to specific audiences. Most of all, support is needed, as attendance at events typically falls back on the Communications Office, which has already lost the staff position dedicated to this task.

In 2021, the Communications Office began hosting webinars, which have become an alternative to in-person events made commonplace during the pandemic. Similar to events, webinars allow us facetime with an audience and a chance to answer questions. Since they're recorded, webinars have also become video products that live on YouTube and blogs that can be shared when relevant. Hosting webinars was a new effort for the Communications Office, and a lot has been learned during the process. A majority of our audience members were internal to the CBP partnership, which indicates a need to cover topics of a greater interest to the public. Webinars have also not always tied back to CBP work, so more consideration is needed to better include that connection. Overall, creating a strategy that details the steps of creating, promoting and hosting a webinar would benefit the team moving forward.

Recommendations:

- Create an engagement strategy for event participation.
- Update materials for in person events.
- Create talking points for people manning event tables.
- Produce a webinar strategy and process.

Multimedia

The CBP Communications Office produces multimedia products to promote the partnership's work, explain local environmental issues and supplement our partners' own communications efforts. Between 2016 and 2021, we produced 67 videos, added 10,530 photos to our archive

and filled 562 requests for photos and video products from our partners. This content is used heavily throughout chesapeakebay.net and is in many ways a hallmark of our communications work. Videos have become useful for virtual booths during online events.

The amount of views a video has on Vimeo tells us how often videos are being watched on the website. We found that our instructional Bay 101 videos about basic topics are most popular, while videos about individuals and their personal experiences are less popular.

Most viewed videos	Least viewed videos
Bay 101 Blue Crabs (5,600 views)	Chesapeake Stories: Rev. Johnny Calhoun (3 view)
Bay 101 Oysters (5,234 views)	Chesapeake Stories: Dennis Treacy (4 views)
Bay 101 Air Pollution (4,827 views)	Vicki Blazer: What does the Cheapeake mean to you? (4 views)

Table 15: Most and least viewed videos on Vimeo

Our videos also get considerable views on YouTube, despite minimal promotion besides uploading them to the channel. Looking at organizations of similar size and multimedia capabilities, we find that the CBP is on par with other communications teams when it comes to views, in that we have more followers than these groups. YouTube continues to be a popular social media site that doesn't battle for usage the same way Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat do because the content is so different. Considering that we have some videos that are generating attention basically on their own, we should consider investing more time and effort into producing and promoting content on YouTube.

YouTube Views			
CBP (1,108 followers)	VIMS (1,030 followers)	VA Sea Grant (291 followers)	NFWF (529 followers)
How to Shuck an Oyster (70,671)	Mating crabs (37,000)	How to build a taylor float for oyster gardening (23,000)	Flight to Survive: Saving Whooping Cranes (122,000)
Restoring the Chesapeake Watershed (8,622)	Swimming blue crab (35,000)	How to build a flip float for oyster gardening (12,000)	Path of the Pronghorn (5,900)
From the Field: A glimpse into a restored Chesapeake oyster reef (5,681)	Coquina clams (27,000)	Cownose rays shown using specialized fins to sort and manipulate oysters (4,800)	Webinar: Easygrants mapping tool (1,400)

Table 16: YouTube views for videos from Chesapeake Bay Program and other organizations

Photography continues to be a strong suit of the CBP Communications Office. Blogs, social media, web pages and print products all benefit from our original photography. Partners make use of the content as well. This indicates a strong need for visuals in the environmental sector—photography is often the best way to communicate the *why* behind our work and helps people feel connected to the region. Community-based photo essays on our blog are some of the pieces most commented on and allow us to represent the diversity of the region's inhabitants in our communications. However, with a lack of established guidelines around how photos should be used, stock photos and inaccurate photos still end up on web products.

Recommendations:

- Increase geographic and demographic diversity of photos/videos.
- Make a plan for updating outdated Bay 101 videos in the coming years.
- Photograph science and monitoring more consistently throughout the year to anticipate major announcements.
- Continue to make time for community-based photo essays.
- Create a manageable strategy for YouTube.
- Produce photographic standards for partnership-wide use.

Consolidated recommendations

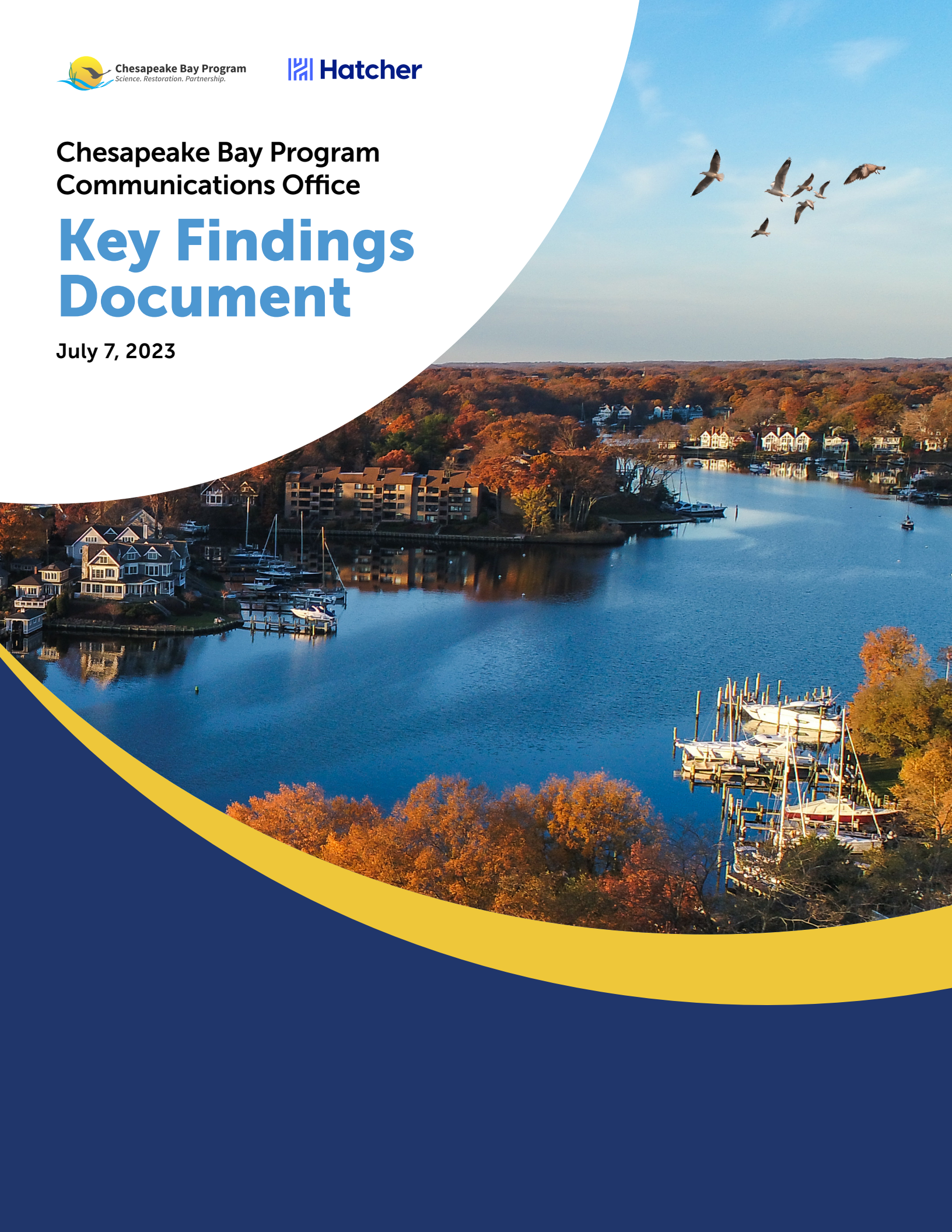
Based on the above observations, the Communications Office has a variety of opportunities to improve its work moving forward:

- **Produce specific guidelines and strategies as needed:** Various communications products are being produced without a documented strategy, including webinars, print products and event participation. Additionally, documented standards are needed for print and photography products.
- **Create a strategy for keeping web content on chesapeakebay.net up to date:** We've identified a need for a content strategy to keep top level pages, such as Learn the Issues, Field Guide entries and popular blogs, up to date. Many Bay 101 videos are over 10 years old and could be updated in the coming years.
- **Refine website to better highlight CBP work:** The audit demonstrated an education vs. promotion challenge that could be resolved through changes to web content. Web pages can be updated to more clearly mention the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*, its goals and outcome, CBP GITs, and their work, when applicable. Moving, removing and consolidating content could also allow us to better highlight pages that speak to our work.
- **Consider design and multimedia additions to high traffic web pages:** Pages such as Watershed and blogs such as "Are There Sharks in the Chesapeake Bay?" receive consistent monthly traffic and could be enhanced with photography, graphic design, calls to action and embedded videos.
- **Experiment with new social media management:** There is a need to reach younger audiences via social media, but we do not currently have the resources to maintain another channel. Consider posting less on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to allow room for production on other channels, such as YouTube or TikTok. Adjust goals to include a Facebook/Instagram story as a post and pursue for story creation.
- **Produce evergreen posts for social media:** While we know what posts receive the highest engagement, it's a challenge to find and produce the content. Creating an archive of posts that can be posted seasonally, as well as a list of blogs that typically do well on social media, could help us consistently make engaging posts.
- **Add and consolidate content on chesapeakebay.net:** Consider consolidating duplicate *Issues* and *State* pages, as well as those pages under Who We Are to reduce content and highlight CBP work. Add additional *Issues* pages and content for How To's & Tips.
- **Partner with the web team on updating internal pages:** Workgroup pages are not meeting the needs of our internal audiences, though this communications need is often neglected. A comprehensive assessment and update of internal uses of the site is needed.
- **Develop media relations:** Media operations, such as generating attention around press releases and being solicited by media for quotes, could be improved with updated media lists and contractual support. This includes creating targeted media lists for different announcements, building relationships with media outlets and hiring support for public relations.

**Chesapeake Bay Program
Communications Office**

Key Findings Document

July 7, 2023



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Part 1: Introduction

Executive summary/situation analysis

Formed in 1983, the Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) is a unique regional partnership that leads and directs the restoration of the Chesapeake Bay. Program partners include several federal and state agencies as well as local governments, nonprofit organizations, and academic institutions. CBP oversees the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement, which aligns federal directives with state and local goals to create a healthy bay.

In two years, CBP will communicate progress on 2025 restoration goals, which is a huge responsibility and a large opportunity for the small but mighty CBP Communications Office. Comprised of three full-time staff funded through the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay and one Chesapeake Research Consortium staffer, the communications team is doing excellent work, but its capacity is spread thin. To put this in perspective across the organization and taking the team's size compared to the number of Goal Implementation Teams (GITS), workgroups, and committees that require some level of communications support, there are six GITS, which include approximately 30 workgroups, three advisory committees, and the Scientific, Technical Assessment and Reporting (STAR) team.

Recognizing the need to determine which priorities to focus on over the next five years, the CBP Communications Office engaged The Hatcher Group to support the development of a five-year strategic communications plan. As one of the first tasks in developing the plan, we conducted research—including meetings with the communications team, and individual interviews and focus groups with internal staff and external stakeholders and partners (participants).

When asked to describe the Chesapeake Bay Program, common responses through this research ranged from “complex; complicated; bureaucracy; burdensome; overwhelming” to “partnership; science integrity; groundbreaking; water quality” the glue that holds restoration together.” Participants felt most audiences have a positive perception of CBP, especially elected officials, federal agencies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Geography seemed to play a role in perception, according to participants: People in Annapolis and Maryland's Eastern Shore may not fully understand the difference between CBP and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, but they are generally interested in cleaning the Bay and have a good perception of CBP; however, folks in Pennsylvania are perceived to be “resistant” to CBP projects.

Our research shows several important opportunities for enhancing communications and streamlining work. A lack of capacity—having too many communications deliverables and being short-staffed—was cited by *all* participants as a major issue, if not the biggest issue, they face in being more proactive and strategic about communications.

In the sections below, we provide more details about the results of our research.

Methodology

- Held kick-off meeting on March 15, 2023, with the CBP Communications Office:
 - Rachel Felver, CBP Communications Director
 - Will Parson, Multimedia Manager
 - Jake Solyst, Web Content Manager
 - Marisa Baldine, Communications Staffer
- Conducted interviews between April 27 and June 13 with:
 - Carin Bisland, former Partnerships & Accountability Branch Chief, EPA Chesapeake Bay Program
 - Mariah Davis, Deputy Director, Choose Clean Water Coalition
 - Rona Kobell, Cofounder and President, Environmental Justice Journalism Initiative
 - Brittany Omoleye-Hall, Education Coordinator, NPS Chesapeake Bay Office; Chair, CBP Diversity Workgroup
 - Media:
 - Christine Condon, Baltimore Sun
 - Jacob Fenston, WAMU
 - Phil Gruber, Lancaster Farming
 - Lara Lutz, Bay Journal
 - Joel McCord, formerly WYPR
- Conducted focus groups between April 27 and May 18 with:
 - **NGO Communications:**
 - Jody Hedeman Couser, Senior Vice President of Communications, Chesapeake Conservancy
 - Kelly Donaldson, Communications Lead, Pennsylvania Sea Grant
 - Nicole Duimstra, Communications & Campaign Manager, Virginia Conservation Network
 - Tali MacArthur, Program Manager for Watershed Outreach, Pennsylvania Organization for Watersheds and Rivers, Pennsylvania Environmental Council
 - Drew Robinson, Senior Communications Manager, Choose Clean Water Coalition
 - **State and Regional Government Partners:**
 - Julie Lawson, Liaison with DC Department of Energy & Environment and University of the District of Columbia; Chair, CBP Citizens Advisory Committee
 - Kristen Wolf, Chesapeake Bay Watershed Restoration Division Director, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection
 - **Local Government/Engagement Communications:**
 - Adrianna Berk, Senior Outreach Specialist/Environmental Scientist, Tetra Tech
 - Ruth Cassilly, Non-Point Source Policy Analyst, University of Maryland Extension, CBP
 - Laura Cattell Noll, Coordinator, Local Leadership Workgroup, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay
 - **CBP Leadership:**

- Katie Brownson, U.S. Forest Service Liaison to the Chesapeake Bay Program
- Catherine Krikstan, Web Product Manager/Strategist, UMCES, Chesapeake Bay Program
- Lee McDonnell, Science Analysis & Implementation Branch Chief, CBP
- Martha Shimkin, Deputy Director, CBP
- Denice Wardrop, Executive Director, Chesapeake Research Consortium
- **Jurisdictional/Federal Agency CBP Partners:**
 - Kevin DuBois, Chesapeake Bay Coordinator, Naval Facilities Engineering Command, U.S. Department of Defense
 - Chris Guy, Coordinator, CBP Habitat Goal Implementation Team
 - Jennifer Pauer, Environmental Resources Specialist, West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection
 - Peter Tango, Chesapeake Bay Monitoring Coordinator at the USGS MD-DE- DC Water Science Center; Co-Chair, Science, Technical Assessment, and Reporting Team (STAR)
 - Renee Thompson, Geographer, USGS; Chair, CBP Healthy Watersheds GIT

Part 2: Key Findings

It takes a dialogue, not a monologue, to develop powerful strategies. To begin this dialogue with the CBP Communications Office and its stakeholders, Hatcher conducted research from April through June 2023. From this research, we have a better understanding of CBP's target audiences, needs, challenges, and opportunities. The key findings from our research are detailed below and organized into the following areas: target audiences and engagement challenges, a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), and a social media audit. We also reviewed press releases, blogs, and the internal communications audit done by the CBP Communications Office as well as the diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) strategy as part of this work.

Target Audiences and Engagement:

CBP has a wide range of current partners. This range of partnerships is an enormous strength, but some participants questioned whether everyone on [the long list](#) on the CBP website is an actual partner. Many participants weren't clear of what the CBP Communications Office's goals were when engaging target audiences.

The following is a list of priority audiences identified by the CBP Communications Office and from our research.

Priority audiences currently familiar with CBP:

- Congress and other elected officials from Bay states
- Partner organizations:
 - Federal agencies
 - State agencies
 - Local governments
 - Nonprofit organizations, area environmental organizations

- Academic institutions
- Area residents (especially Annapolis/Maryland's Eastern Shore) interested in the environment and water quality.

According to one participant: "They are doing a good job with people who already engage with the [Chesapeake] Bay Program. They are making efforts to engage with diverse people and groups." According to another: "Do a good job of reaching 'the choir'—interested parties and people who feel [CBP is] accountable to them like partner organizations, Congress, watershed and environmental organizations.

Challenges with audience engagement:

- Across the board, participants brought up the CBP Communications Office's lack of capacity, which affects their ability to better engage with audiences, including:
 - Local governments: Some felt that not all local governments or local elected officials in Bay states are aware of the Chesapeake Bay Program, especially in Pennsylvania and Virginia. "I used to work in the City of Norfolk, and I never heard the name the Chesapeake Bay Program in 20 years."
 - Environmental nonprofits targeting diverse stakeholders: A few participants mentioned broadening partnerships to organizations such as HECHO (Hispanics Enjoying Camping, Hunting, and the Outdoors), Green Latinos, and Nature Forward as a means of reaching more diverse audiences.
 - Outdoor enthusiasts: Some felt that those who recreate near the Bay such as hunters or fishers should be better engaged because they use the resource. "We don't reach more of the people that use the resources—fishers, hunters, recreators—not sure we're reaching them. Find what others are interested in and link it back to them."
 - Urban audiences: Several participants mentioned that urban audiences could be better engaged.
 - Members of the general public: Many participants mentioned that the public does not know the difference between the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the Chesapeake Bay Trust, and the Chesapeake Bay Program. Most questioned whether this should even be an audience, given the CBP Communications Office's small staff.
- Several participants stated that the staff's lack of diversity may hinder their engagement with diverse partners. Some participants mentioned a need to increase racial diversity of staff within the CBP Communications Office and CBP overall. Engaging members of diverse communities means helping them see themselves in CBP's mission. According to one participant: "To reach diverse communities, [community members] need to be able to see themselves in [CBP's] mission."

Opportunities with audience engagement:

Go deep, not wide. Many participants felt the CBP Communications Office should change their focus and communicate across (to partner organizations) and up (to Congressional and other elected officials). They felt that given the small team, they should not try to communicate "down" to reach the public, or local governments and communities instead, strengthen relationships with state agencies and other organizations so they can bridge that gap, such as the departments of natural resources and agricultural extension offices who reach interested communities or organizations like Sustainable Maryland to reach

municipalities. According to one participant: “[CBP] should not be doing community outreach effort if they don’t have the capacity to do so properly. There can be a way to reach those audiences in other capacities and by leveraging partnerships.”

SWOT Analysis:

Strengths:

- **Highly trusted, well-respected communications team.** The CBP Communications Office is a highly trusted, data-driven source for information about the Chesapeake Bay, its tributaries, and the ecosystems surrounding it. The team has long been a resource for elected officials, partners, students, and the media. Participants also noted the CBP Communications Office is one of the strongest and most reliable teams across CBP. Nearly every participant highly regarded its work. Many mentioned that CBP is one of the most trusted voices in the region for environmental restoration. According to one interviewee: “I’m amazed at the work (the CBP Communications Office) does with such a small team and especially with a changing leadership team.”
- **Excel at communicating scientific and technical information.** Participants all agreed that CBP’s Communications Office excels in providing information to those who work in and around clean water about the Bay’s health and overall environmental protection.
 - “CBP is positively regarded in that it implements science and new discovery relatively quickly... I think from the academic perspective, it’s CBP is well regarded from that standpoint.”
 - Specifically, advocates or those who work closely with Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) projects felt that the team provided timely and relevant resources to help them further their work.
 - Media participants also shared this view and consistently said the CBP Communications Office is extremely helpful and responds timely. They rely on the team as their “go-to” for Bay issues and science.
 - Several participants mentioned that CBP Communications Office staff are very talented and some of the best writers they have worked with.
- **Produce high-quality materials.** Participants mentioned that the CBP Communications Office provides a lot of useful resources to CBP Goal Implementation Teams, partners, work groups, and staff. NGO partners felt the Flickr account has excellent photos, and the daily Bay News and weekly Bay Brief newsletters are extremely helpful to them as they do their jobs. According to one participant: “My work with them is less formal, but it’s very important (strategic comms plan, producing a specific product, etc.) work groups seek them out for information and advice.” According to another: “My favorite CBP content is usually case studies (blog, video, etc.). It’s such a nice way to highlight and thank partners and show others that this work is possible.”

Weaknesses:

- **High focus on water quality, nutrient, and sediment pollution significantly outweighs other Agreement goals.** Participants expressed concern about focusing too heavily on coastal issues such as water quality and toxic contaminants clean water, which is putting less attention toward issues particularly impacting topics such as agriculture and forest health that may be of interest to partners who live farther

from the water. *Note: This may be a perception from participants that have not seen all communications materials, such as the Bay News, which clearly does highlight other goals.*

- “The messaging that comes out of the Bay Program often is, is more around that Bay-centric focus, which you know has always been the case. We’ve always kind of pushed to have agriculture more at the Bay table and over the years, I’ve inserted agriculture into messaging because I get to work across 70 work groups...”
- “This is something that I feel as a community we need to do a better job about and that’s not talking about nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment. Not that it’s not important, but an average Joe on the street doesn’t really know why. Those nutrients sound like a good thing, right? So, we need to do a better job overall of talking about stuff that ‘actually’ attacks people such as toxic pollution.”
- “A restored Chesapeake Bay that includes living resources and habitat means that water quality is one of the important things that we must achieve to get to that sustainable ecosystem. Though, there’s a risk of being too heavy-handed on the water quality side and we have really good, newsworthy things with some of the other outcomes that I don’t see at all getting picked up by our leadership or anybody else. We have the largest, most successful oyster restoration program in the world right now.”

Note: We include this sentiment here and not in the weaknesses about CBP overall, below, since it does seem focused on messaging and communications, or at least the perception of those communications. However, this also appears to be an overall CBP perception. Furthermore, this may be a perception from participants that have not seen all communications materials, such as the Bay News, which clearly does highlight other goals. Nevertheless, it would be beneficial to review and brainstorm ways to reach stakeholders to ensure they are seeing these communications.

- **Lack of internal communication and too many silos.** Interviews from several focus groups voiced concerns about a lack of internal communications and a need for more collaboration.
 - Some internal stakeholders mentioned a need for better internal communications within CBP. According to one participant: “Sometimes I’m caught off guard on certain topics. If they had checked with us [before issuing a communication], we could have helped the messaging and added to the science.” Another interviewee echoed this: “Advocates can feel off-guard and don’t know that [CBP Communications Office staff are] doing a blog or story and do not check in with organizations about projects they work on. They’re doing a lot of messaging but perhaps not collaborating the right way.”
 - Some participants also mentioned that the CBP Communications Office should focus on internal communication to coordinate with its partners and ensure everyone’s voice is heard. According to one participant: “[CBP’s] communications are directed toward the general public, and maybe we should be spending more time developing communication materials with trusted sources so that they can disseminate that versus us trying to reach

- people directly.”
- Along this theme, some agency partners mentioned that the CBP Communications Office could collaborate more and sometimes asks for communications that could be found online. According to one participant: “Sometimes it feels one-sided—they are asking for our stories, but they could steal/ very liberally take them from our monthly newsletters and annual reports. We are getting overwhelmed with EPA regulations/bureaucratic work that must be done so it can be hard to participate sometimes. There is complexity with the partnership. CBP is disconnected from their own agency, EPA—they should be looking at EPA and other federal partners to see how they can collaborate on what they are doing.”
- **Unclear communications goals.** Many participants—both internal and external stakeholders—cited that they were not clear of the CBP Communications Office’s communications goals and why they were trying to reach certain audiences. According to one participant: “The website has over a million users a year. But what are we trying to do? In the past, CBP was to be THE leading source of information about the Chesapeake Bay. Is this still the goal? Maybe based on past goals, are these the best goals? They are using the platforms to recycle older content to be more efficient, but maybe there’s a way to focus on reducing the amount of things.”

Weaknesses referenced about CBP overall that could impact the CBP Communications Office:

- **Need for collaboration:** Many participants outside of the direct Bay area, such as Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia, felt that too many silos exist within CBP overall and that more collaboration is needed internally for workgroups to be more effective, e.g., internal communication between Goal Implementation Teams (GIT), including about DEIJ work. According to one participant: “We don’t really hear about what each other is doing. I don’t know what the water quality GIT is doing.”
- **Mixed reviews of DEIJ initiatives.** Some participants felt that the CBP Communications office was overall doing a good job communicating about DEIJ. Other participants felt that DEIJ was not implemented in the work of CBP and the Communications Office as a whole.
 - Participants also communicated that there’s more work to do on centering DEIJ in all of the Program and Communications Office work versus it being a separate conversation; and needs to foster not only a culture of inclusion, but also a culture of justice. Environmental justice work is critical to CBP’s goals, it may take less precedence than overall diversity, equity, and inclusion work.
 - One participant said, “Everything should be centered on DEIJ...it shouldn’t be a separate conversation... [the Communications Office] have the ability to help us with communicating the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice, not as a check box, but as a central tenet of the work that we do as the Bay Program.”

Opportunities:

- **Continue positive relationships.** Many participants stressed the importance of continuing positive relationships with elected officials. As climate change continues to become more of a political and dividing issue, stakeholders stressed that CBP’s funding can ebb and flow throughout different presidential administrations.

Participants mentioned that CBP has strong relationships with elected officials and NGOs in Bay states and wants to see those positive relationships continue. Media reporters interviewed also cited positive relationships with the CBP Communications Office.

- **Shape the narrative for “Reaching 2025” Chesapeake Bay Agreement outcomes to gain more trust.** Many participants felt the CBP Communications Office has an upcoming opportunity to communicate transparently about Bay restoration progress to date. Participants agreed that CBP should focus on its accomplishments while also advocating for future progress to meet its goals and take accountability for the goals it did not meet. Participants mentioned that negative messaging and continually highlighting where goals have come up short can often disengage potential volunteers, advocates, or new audiences. However, media reporters mentioned the need to be transparent. “Don’t bury bad news. Don’t write a press release to serve partners; write it to serve the media, or you lose our trust. I thought the [most recent press release](#) was very candid about really difficult news, and that is effective.”
- **Prioritize internal communication, coordination, and collaboration to advance Bay goals.** Given CBP’s unique partnership, many participants felt that the CBP Communications Office should focus its efforts on internal communications to continually connect with federal, regional, state, and local partners.
 - In terms of DEIJ, it was suggested that the CBP Communications Office home in on internal communications to ensure partners and leadership understand what CBP offers and how to work together most efficiently.
 - Many local partners feel that CBP’s staff often do not have the strong community connections they bring. They mentioned the importance of internal collaboration to spread the messages of local activism and providing resources that those local partners can use as they see fit while allowing local partners to connect with their own communities.
 - “CBP is strongest when they communicate up to the decision makers. Leave the talking to the general public to the community-based partners, the people who are actually in those communities and know how to talk to them.”
- **Communicate about co-benefits of Bay work.** Multiple focus group participants mentioned the opportunity to communicate more about the co- or multiple benefits of achieving Bay goals.
 - Participants mentioned the economic and environmental benefits, such as, “By implementing X best practice, you can increase property values, increase resilience to climate change, and reduce flooding.” According to one participant: “I don’t even mention water quality because most people don’t really care about that, but they do care about beautifying their community and increasing property values.”
 - Others mentioned that when focusing on water quality is necessary, it’s important to keep in mind that water quality impacts every community, and each community has access to water in some capacity but are not always picturing the actual Bay. For example, while residents of Annapolis or Anne Arundel County, Maryland, may have regular access to the Chesapeake Bay, residents of Washington, D.C., and other noncoastal communities in

other Bay states have access to other water sources such as small streams and rivers. Local partners noted that CBP should work to promote the local benefits of water quality for all bodies of water, rather than focusing on how cleaning up the Bay's tributaries create a cleaner Bay. According to one participant: "We have to talk about [Bay restoration] as tradeoffs and then benefits to the local community because what do [Pennsylvania residents] care about issues 60 miles or 100 miles downstream?"

- **Bring diversity into communications.** On a similar note, though including racial and ethnic diversity is an important part of including different lived experiences to the partnership's work, participants noted that geographic diversity is another effective way to ensure that CBP's work includes everyone in the watershed. For example, including voices and photos from rural farm populations, riverside communities, and urban neighborhoods in addition to traditional coastal communities can offer perspectives from many walks of life and will allow for more collaboration within the partnership.
- **Reach younger audiences.** Many participants mentioned that younger, college-aged and early in career audiences may not be as engaged as other audiences. Many CBP partners mentioned that the key audiences are older, which may be isolating younger audiences from understanding what they're inheriting.
- **"Give credit" for work across the Bay.** Some internal focus group participants felt that CBP's partners often tried to "own" projects and focus on their own interests, which takes away from collaboration. However, a handful of external participants felt that specific organizations should receive credit for their role in a project, rather than credit going to CBP entirely. They mentioned that partners feel that they do all the work and the organization, who may not have a large role in the project itself, gets all the credit. This is an opportunity to build goodwill with partners by citing them in communications materials and/or asking them to disseminate materials and add their part in the effort to the communication.
 - One participant said: "... I often hear 'is it the big Program office or the partnership getting credit for that?' These other entities need credit but also the blame. I sometimes feel like people just talk about the EPA and the Program is so much more than that. It goes back to what the partnership is. I heard a partner group recently say 'yeah, we do the work, and CBP gets the credit.'"
 - Another participant said: "I think we have to get away from 'we need to get credit' and people need to know that it's a Chesapeake Bay Program. If all the local governments do that, then the states can achieve their goal. And if the states achieve their goals and the Bay Program is going to achieve its goal."

Threats:

- **Capacity.** The lack of capacity came up in every single interview and focus group. The CBP Communications Office is spread too thin or is too understaffed to be able to keep up with being proactive, strategic, or intentional about communicating CBP's work and the progress made to meet the Watershed Agreement goals. As cited in the Executive Summary, there are six GITS, which include roughly 30 workgroups, three advisory committees, and the Scientific, Technical Assessment and Reporting (STAR) team that require some level of communications support.

Many mentioned that in a perfect world, the Communications Office would be larger to be able to tackle a larger scope of skills and work, including on-the-ground outreach and/or community organizing, or narrow their focus. According to one participant: “The team either needs to do [fewer things] better or bring on more staff.” Some internal participants mentioned that the CBP Communications Office often gets stuck creating agendas for executive meetings and creating reports such as the “Reaching 2025” report, for the whole Program, doing a lot of the heavy lifting that should not fall to them. Several participants did not see the value of certain outreach efforts, such as the Chesapeake Bay Awareness Week.

- **Identity.** Almost all stakeholders that were not CBP staff referred to the Program as the “EPA’s Chesapeake Bay Program,” which can often have negative connotations with audiences hesitant to environmental regulation, such as farmers, and shows a core identity issue. Many stakeholders were unaware that NOAA and other federal agencies were also part of CBP. Some noted that many audiences are unaware of CBP, even calling it “invisible.” According to one interviewee: “Many people don’t understand what they do. If you’re outside the inner circle, exposure is limited.”

Next Steps:

Along with this final draft version of the findings document, we’ve included the social media audit along with it. We’ll go over the social media audit and hear from you about your goals on Wednesday, July 12. Next, we will develop recommendations including:

- Goals and strategies to reach target audiences.
- Ways to improve partnership engagement in communications needs and priorities.
- Communications priorities to focus on for the short- and long-term.
- Measurements of success and potential capacity gaps.

Hatcher will send the recommendations document by Friday, July 21. We will also develop a survey about the proposed recommendations.

After reviewing the recommendations with your team, we will come to the CBP office in Annapolis to facilitate two two-hour, in-person discussions with the communications team and if desired, the CBP leadership team.