

CHESAPEAKE RIPARIAN FOREST BUFFER INITIATIVE

Guidance for State Task Forces

Background

Federal, state, and private partners have been working together to restore the Chesapeake Bay watershed for over 30 years. A priority strategy has been the planting of riparian forest buffers on private lands. Since the first Chesapeake Bay goals were set, over 7,000 miles of forest buffers have been planted in the Bay States, many with the strong support of USDA programs. Riparian forests are a unique best management practice that produces multiple ecosystem benefits including water quality improvement, stream temperature protection, stream bank stabilization, habitat, and healthy aquatic systems.

The Chesapeake region has been a national leader in riparian forest buffer implementation. CREPs, the programs responsible for most new riparian forest buffers, bring together federal, state and private resources. The Maryland CREP was the first in the nation and was introduced in response to Chesapeake restoration goals. USDA pioneered partnership agreements with conservation organizations to provide technical assistance to landowners. Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania have developed supportive cost-share programs as well as rules for water quality trading that allow landowners to generate water quality credits for riparian forest buffers.

Even with early successes, strong goals, and substantial funding, the pace of new riparian forest buffer enrollment and establishment in the watershed has declined significantly since 2002. This is happening at a time when states are counting on this practice to meet TMDL regulations, and when federal agencies have committed to this work as part of the President's Executive Order of 2009.

As a result, federal, state and private partners are being asked to carefully examine past and current efforts and identify opportunities that can accelerate implementation of riparian forest buffers. It is time for the Chesapeake to re-establish its precedent-setting leadership in riparian forest buffer implementation by transforming current programs and creating new opportunities that are cooperative, efficient and uniquely targeted toward this important practice. The Chesapeake Riparian Forest Buffer Initiative offers a focused, practical, streamlined approach to partner at all levels to identify barriers to forested riparian buffer program establishment in each state and generate strategies to address barriers and increase program enrollment. Through this Initiative, USDA and EPA will work with their state partners to expedite and smooth the path for implementing reforms, dramatically boosting forested buffer establishment in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

A Task Force in each state will be responsible for identifying barriers to forest buffer establishment in each state and suggesting reforms. The State Task Force is the heart of the Initiative and integral to producing meaningful results. The State Task Force process is intended to be brief, targeted, streamlined and practical. A Steering Committee helps guide and support the Riparian Forest Buffer Initiative and will provide expert support to each State Task Force as well as work with the state, and federal agencies and stakeholders to facilitate and help implement reforms.

Task Force Organization

In each Chesapeake Bay State, the FSA Executive Director and NRCS State Conservationist will convene the leaders of state environmental and natural resource agencies, and other federal, state and private partners who are influential in riparian forest buffer implementation/innovation in their state. Each Task Force will decide how to organize and invite participants in order to effectively identify barriers to forest buffer enrollment and strategies to address them. The Task Force may be linked with existing state efforts such as State Technical or CREP Committees if appropriate. The leader of the State Task Force will be responsible for communicating progress to the Steering Committee.

Task Force Objectives

1. Identify the network of agencies/private groups supporting riparian forest buffer implementation in the State.
2. Work with USDA to make prompt reforms to existing state-federal programs (note- in most cases the task forces do not have authority to modify most federal procedure)
3. Lay the groundwork for any needed longer-term program or procedural changes
4. Identify regional or national level issues outside the purview of state leadership
5. Request necessary staffing (including outreach) and/or professional technical assistance/resource needs
6. Communicate regularly with the Steering Committee on Task Force progress.
7. Provide an interim report by October 30, 2014, that includes: the scope/outline of planned or recommended program changes or opportunities, issues, topics, and challenges identified and discussed, and suggestions on how they can be addressed.
8. Prepare a final State Riparian Forest Buffer report, including list of recommendations and implementing strategies by February 27, 2015.

Task Force Timeline

August 2014--- Initial Task Force meeting

October 2014—Interim written report of challenges, opportunities, and recommendations

December 2014 --- Feedback from Steering Committee to State Task Forces

February 2015 --- Final report of findings and recommended actions from State Task Forces

June 2015 ---Presentation of findings and Initiative action plan to the Chesapeake Bay Program Executive Council and USDA Leadership.

Key Considerations

Each state will identify challenges and opportunities and develop specific actions related to the following areas of concern that have been identified as important for consideration in the implementation of riparian forest buffer programs and efforts:

1. Program Leadership and Coordination
2. Policy or guidance adjustments
3. Landowner Outreach
4. Establishment, Maintenance, Compliance and Reenrollment
5. Technical Assistance Delivery
6. Financial Incentives (federal, state, private)

Support

The Steering Committee will provide support and expert resources to each State Task Force.