

USDA-EPA Task Force on Crediting USDA Practices – Top Solutions

Focus of Task Force & Objectives – Task Force is solely focused on improving crediting of USDA practices, while ensuring farmer privacy continues to be protected and Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) protocols are followed, meeting these four objectives:

1. Develop a full accounting of USDA practices, considering double counting
2. Identify and verify expired¹ USDA practices
3. Credit more USDA practices
4. Develop time-savings methodologies

Criteria for Solutions – The Task Force chose solutions that meet the diverse needs of the states and advance a fuller accounting of USDA conservation practices. Solutions:

- maintain scientific integrity of CBP decision-making process and accounting tools,
- continue to protect producer privacy,
- advance holistic, sustainable remedies that address all four objectives,
- save time, money, and staff

Task Force’s Solutions – These solutions were developed by the Task Force members who are experts in their fields with decades of experience working with agriculture, natural resources, conservation practices, producers, and the CBP on science and research of practice implementation and crediting. Over four meetings, the Task Force initially identified 16 possible solutions – some that address all or most of the four objectives and others that address some of the objectives and/or practices. The Task Force developed a prioritized list of the top holistic solutions for state and federal leaderships’ feedback. The Task Force and the State environmental and agricultural secretaries and commissioners advanced seven top solutions to USDA and EPA leadership. USDA and EPA leadership agreed to advance six of the seven solutions and added an additional emerging opportunity related to adaptive management and technology.

Solution Endorsement – Jurisdictions are not required to adopt all solutions. Jurisdictions will have the option to propose adoption of specific solutions for their respective states through the Chesapeake Bay Program approval process and vote.

Solution 1: USDA Coordinate Conservation Data Sharing Agreements Process with States – USDA pursue establishment of data conservation agreements with interested and eligible State agencies, Land Grant Universities, or other eligible party. These conservation data sharing agreements would allow states to get a full accounting of practices without double counting.

- For this solution, USDA needs the answers to a questionnaire to ensure farmer/ customer privacy is protected according to law and eligibility requirements are met.
- This solution also includes an eligible 3rd party verifying expired USDA practices. On-site re-verification of expired¹ practices requires permission to access private land.
- USDA will not pursue verification of expired¹ USDA practices under this solution, but will rely on states to execute verification. USDA-NRCS will continue to focus on its programs to encourage the adoption of voluntary conservation.

Solution 2: USGS Aggregate USDA and State Data – this solution is based on a successful pilot project funded by EPA and carried out by EPA, NRCS, and PA agencies. USGS currently has data conservation agreements with NRCS and FSA. USGS could enter into similar agreements with desiring states to

¹ – expired practices are those that have exceeded the Chesapeake Bay Program’s credit duration.

receive all state practice data. USGS could combine the USDA and state data into one database, remove any duplicate records, and report the full aggregated dataset back to the State in compliance with the data privacy provisions of the Farm Bill (Section 1619).

- **Funding Need:** Over the last 10 years, EPA has provided \$27,500/year for USGS to aggregate USDA data in compliance with the USGS conservation data sharing agreements with NRCS and FSA. USGS estimates that an additional \$65,000/state/year would be necessary to aggregate the USDA and State data. This new funding need will decrease over time as methodologies are worked out with USGS and the States.
- This solution also includes USDA or an eligible 3rd party verifying expired USDA practices, since re-verification of expired¹ practices requires permission to access private land.
- USDA will not pursue verification of expired¹ USDA practices under this solution, but will rely on states to execute verification. USDA-NRCS will continue to focus on its programs to encourage the adoption of voluntary conservation.

Solution 3: Chesapeake Watershed Conservation Survey - a random, statistically valid survey of conservation practices throughout the watershed every 3-5 years could provide a snapshot of conservation on the ground without having the states expend resources to annually track and re-verify expired¹ practices.

- The survey could be modeled after NRCS's Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) surveys. NRCS plans to conduct a national CEAP survey (including the Chesapeake Bay watershed) in the fall of 2024, 2025, and 2026.

Solution 4: Farm Inventories in Sub-Watersheds - trusted ag professionals survey farms within a particular sub-watershed to track and verify practices and assess opportunities for further conservation work. This approach has been highly effective with key populations such as the Plain Sect community. The challenge is that this solution is resource and staff intensive.

Solution 5: Combination of Surveys, Remote Sensing, and Reports - transect surveys that many states currently use for crediting practices (cover crops, tillage practices), FSA reports, and remote sensing can focus on different categories of practices that do not overlap and, when combined, can capture most of the practices on the landscape.

Solution 6: Credit more USDA Practice Categories – that are not fully captured and consider opportunities to streamline CBP partnership's approval process for crediting these USDA practices where there is sufficient data on practice effectiveness from USDA Agricultural Research Service and NRCS Conservation Effects Assessment Project.

Solution 7, Emerging Opportunities: Adaptive Management with Emerging Technologies – CBP partnership continues to take an adaptive management approach and consider the feasibility of emerging technologies like remote sensing and artificial intelligence (including machine learning) in reducing the technical and financial resources needed to credit and re-verifying expired conservation practices.

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