Agriculture Workgroup Prioritization Document: 2025-2026

Background: The role of the Agriculture Workgroup (AgWG) has evolved over time, with changes in what the group discusses and produces being influenced by broader Chesapeake Bay Program partnership activities (namely, CB model development). The CBP is now entering a new period of change, with the Beyond 2025 effort shifting program-wide structure and function and a newly formed Agricultural Advisory Committee informing the partnership's leadership bodies on high-level, agricultural policy issues. These changes, and the desire expressed by several AgWG members to reevaluate how workgroup time is spent, were the impetus for this effort to identify the group's priorities for the coming two years.

At its October 2024 meeting, the AgWG began the process of identifying priority areas of focus through 2026. Between October 2024 and February of 2025, the monthly agendas included presentations and discussions that described the history and structure of the AgWG and external changes impacting the future of the AgWG. These topics included: AgWG history and place within the partnership structure; the STAC CESR report; Beyond 2025; and CBP Advisory Committees, particularly the appointment of the new Agricultural Advisory Committee. Throughout this process, the AgWG leadership team has solicited input from workgroup members and meeting participants regarding interest in having these and other topics explored by the workgroup. The AgWG leadership team has received many ideas and thanks the workgroup participants for their engagement in this process.

Purpose: We now seek to compile this information to identify priority topics for the workgroup for the coming 18 months. This will formalize the interests of the AgWG and support agenda-building, project development, and a "workplan" to advance those interests. The AgWG was formed under the Water Quality Goal Implementation Team (WQGIT) and is responsible for supporting progress toward achieving the outcomes associated with the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement Water Quality Goal (particularly the Reducing Excess Nitrogen, Phosphorus, and Sediment Outcome*). The topics listed in this document are those that 1) are of interest to AgWG membership and 2) support progress toward achieving the Water Quality Goal and associated outcomes. Outlining the focus areas of this workgroup is particularly necessary given the significant volume of nutrient and sediment pollution reduction that will be expected to come from the agriculture sector.

On the following pages, we synthesize 5 months of discussions and feedback, identifying a purpose statement for our group to fulfil and two core pillars that support our group's effort to fulfil it. Each pillar has associated objectives: these have been extracted from our discussions and are what the workgroup feels it can and should pursue in the coming 1-2 years. We have also captured possible actions to take to achieve those objectives, which have been assigned to the action categories "learning", "leading", and "improving" to distinguish how differing levels of these activities support the overall objectives. "Learning" actions are those that support AgWG members and interested parties in enhancing their understanding of a particular topic through informational presentations or the solicitation of specific information through surveys or similar mechanisms. "Leading" actions represent novel efforts, either for the workgroup or the partnership as a whole, to achieve the listed objectives. "Improving" actions are those that establish more efficient and effective methods for executing the work that the group already does to achieve our objectives.

While not a significant departure from the long-term, foundational purpose of our group, it *is* a marked change to how we conceptualize our approach to fulfilling our purpose. We found significant overlap between the prioritization discussions held in 2018-19 and those we had over the last few months; however, we felt we needed to re-center around the AgWG's purpose and renew out commitment to these topics given changing internal and external conditions. This document outlines a strategy for how we can do that.

*Previously the 2025 WIP Outcome

Pillar 1: Implementation of Agricultural Best Management Practices

One of the ways in which the partnership can advance toward achieving its ag-sector pollution reduction targets is through the implementation of pollution-reducing Best Management Practices. A tremendous amount of work has been done to this point to install practices, and this work must not only continue, but accelerate, if we are to meet water quality outcomes. A unique strength of the AgWG is the dedicated presence of multiple stakeholders representing diverse agricultural, environmental, and government sectors. As a result, the AgWG is poised to explore innovative implementation strategiesand ultimately recommend how the partnership can most efficiently and effectively address the remaining ag nonpoint-source pollutant load.

Objectives:

1) Accelerate BMP implementation across the Watershed.

Significant resources have been devoted to implementing conservation practices throughout the watershed. As we have not historically met our nutrient and sediment pollution reduction targets on assigned timelines, we must focus on accelerating BMP implementation. Therefore, the AgWG can and should discuss provide a forum to assess and recommend strategies for accelerating implementation.

Actions		
Learning	Leading	Improving
Explore innovative implementation strategies employed within and beyond the CBW	Identify and assess alternative implementation incentivization strategies, such as pay-for-performance, financial and technical program supports, and innovative engagement strategies	Enhance partnership support of on-the-ground implementation efforts to which we can provide value
Develop a survey to be delivered to NRCS FO, District Employees, and others to solicit information on the least-implemented BMPs (and why they are least implemented), and the subsets of producers that may need additional incentives to support buy-in.	Identify and assess mechanisms for increased implementation based on best available social science	Develop recommendations for program supports to increase implementation

2) Enhance cross-partner communication/idea-sharing.

CBP partners are doing excellent work to reduce ag nonpoint-source pollution. One of the key roles of the AgWG is to serve as a forum for information exchange and learning, reducing redundancy in effort and building coalitions to help advance projects more efficiently. Further, enhanced communication among workgroup members will help us collectively avoid

"reinventing the wheel" by building on successes experienced and avoiding pitfalls found by others.

Actions		
Learning	Leading	Improving
Spotlight "success stories", including legislation, policies, and programs championed by partners	Discuss and assess cutting-edge research, technology, and programs	Identify opportunities for cross-partner collaboration on implementation projects, if and when such opportunities exist.
Better understand implementation challenges and barriers faced by partners		
Allocate time on agendas for AgWG members to deliver presentations on topics of their choosing to advance cross-partner learning; coordinate these presentations as far in advance as possible.		

3) Expand AgWG reach through external communication and education.

Greater public awareness of the challenges facing the Chesapeake Bay – and the excellent work that is being done to address those challenges – may increase support for our collective (and individual) efforts. The AgWG is a platform to communicate information about the partnership, the work of our partners, and more, not just to each other but to a much wider audience, too. Workgroup members have identified an opportunity for the group to expand its reach through better communicating with external parties (ranging from interested individuals, such as those tapped to participate in the Agricultural Advisory Committee, to conservation district staff and TA providers, to industry associations). Enhancing external connections will ultimately bring additional Bay stewards into the fold and expand the input we receive from producers/those most impacted by our decisions.

Actions		
Learning	Leading	Improving
Understand how similar partnerships engage stakeholders	Develop/test innovative outreach strategies	Use AgWG website as a repository for watershed-wide ag information
		Visualize implementation through mapping (to the extent possible given data privacy concerns)

4) Track and understand agricultural industry trends and their implications for agricultural non-point pollution.

Understanding trends in agriculture from industry professionals can inform the workgroup's efforts and ensure that we remain focused on salient ag issues and priorities.

Actions		
Learning	Leading	Improving
Hear directly from industry representatives about industry directions and challenges for implementation of BMPs and related conservation programs	Pursue partnerships that recognize industry changes that will support implementation efforts	Determine priorities proactively, understanding what is "on the horizon" for ag stakeholders

5) Assess options for innovative BMP implementation programs.

Recent reports and publications from the Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee have highlighted limitations of current voluntary BMP adoption programs. The reports recommend innovations in these programs including identifying high-load areas in the watershed and then targeting resources/prioritizing implementation in those areas. That is an exercise that could be explored further by the AgWG. Other recommendations encourage assessing the water quality impacts of systemic and historical changes in agriculture, including shifts in commodity production systems and practices related to organic and synthetic fertilizers in the region.

Actions		
Learning	Leading	Improving
Understand impact of mass imbalance on efforts to achieve pollution reduction targets	Spearhead partnership-wide effort to explore strategies to address mass (im)balance in the watershed	Advise on how to potentially reconsider allocating resources and implementation efforts
Explore impacts of tiered approaches to BMP implementation used in CBW and elsewhere	Pioneer and assess tiered approaches to BMP implementation programs	

6) Understand and evaluate ag-sector WIP progress.

The AgWG is responsible for assisting the jurisdictions in progressing toward their ag-sector WIP targets. There are several ways in which the AgWG can support jurisdictions, including: a) understanding the ag-sector WIP targets across the jurisdictions, b) supporting the jurisdictions' efforts to meet those targets, c) sharing information and resources across jurisdictions about successes and challenges, and d) tracking progress toward those targets. Focusing on these steps will help AgWG leadership refine how to most effectively allocate time.

Actions

Learning	Leading	Improving
Regular updates from representatives of the jurisdictions on progress made toward ag-sector targets, highlighting priority BMPs and strategies for expanding implementation in the coming year	Serve as model for collaboration between CBP workgroup and partners involved in WIP implementation	Develop stronger support network for jurisdictions in meeting ag-sector WIP targets and specific projects

Pillar 2: Crediting and Verification of Agricultural Practices

The main mechanism for achieving progress toward pollution reduction targets is implementing agricultural Best Management Practices, but that impact is tracked, and our progress is ultimately measured, by the calculated "credit" that is assigned to each of those practices in the Bay Program's suite of modeling tools. *What practices receive* credit and *how much* credit is assigned are both significant variables in the progress equation and help us determine how much work has been done, and how much remains. Tracking and verifying the implementation and impact of these practices across the Watershed is also essential for assessing progress. It is also essential that scientific and technical advancements that can assist in the development of new, refined, and innovative practices, verification, modeling, and monitoring be assessed by CBP partners. The AgWG addresses these questions for ag-sector BMPs to complement the work being done on the ground to put more beneficial practices in place.

Objectives:

1) Evaluate credits for BMPs not currently incorporated into the CBP's suite of modeling tools

Not all ag BMPs are currently creditable in the Bay Program's suite of modeling tools, yet may have beneficial impacts on water quality outcomes. To evaluate new BMPs, the AgWG must initiate the process of determining nutrient and sediment reduction efficiencies, among other metrics, for the practices. The AgWG can create appropriate sub-groups (e.g., expert panels, teams) to conduct these reviews and make recommendations.

Actions		
Learning	Leading	Improving
Understand implementation trends (particular BMPs growing in popularity, etc.)	Solicit priority BMPs to credit from partners and develop procedures (such as expert panels) to assess their impacts and credits. Priority BMPs currently identified include Agroforestry (alley cropping/silvopasture) and Biochar.	Assess the NRCS/CBP BMP crosswalk to determine BMPs not currently receiving credit
		Account for practices *on the ground* and not incorporated into CBP modeling tools by pursuing 1619 data sharing agreements

2) Regularly evaluate BMPs currently receiving credit in the CBP's suite of modeling tools.

The partnership strives to model real-world processes and outcomes as accurately as possible. The AgWG is responsible for evaluating agricultural BMPs that currently receive credit in our modeling tools to ensure that their impacts are modeled "correctly" in accordance with the best available science. All ag BMPs should be periodically evaluated for this reason.

Actions		
Learning	Leading	Improving
Discuss latest research on CBP-credited BMPs	Develop standardized protocol for BMP revision	Revisit definitions and credit durations Specific BMPs to consider: - Stream exclusion/pasture fence - Liquid manure incorporation - Dairy precision feeding - Ag drainage management

3) Develop methods for verifying BMPs not implemented through traditional channels (traditional channels being cost-share, etc.).

BMPs can be implemented without being counted for progress toward CBP goals. Some BMPs are implemented without the involvement of external parties. Partners have expressed interest in determining methods for locating and crediting these practices.

Actions		
Learning	Leading	Improving
Hear from ag stakeholders, including producers and TA providers, about BMPs that may be implemented but not tracked	Compile assessment of BMPs implemented through unconventional means	Propose revisions to CBP reporting and verification protocols to expand creditable BMPs

4) Leverage technology to enhance BMP verification.

There are many possible ways to verify the presence of BMPs on the landscape. The partnership is interested in taking advantage of cutting-edge technology to make BMP verification as efficient, comprehensive, and accurate as possible.

Actions		
Learning	Leading	Improving
Host presentations on novel technologies that could be applied to BMP verification	Outline novel methods to enhance CBP verification efforts	Update existing verification guidance to reflect latest science
	Identify BMPs suitable for remote sensing (and other technology)- based verification	

5) Enhance understanding of, and explore crediting options for, BMP co-benefits (benefits beyond N, P, S reduction).

When we think about which BMPs we prioritize and incentivize, we often (understandably) do so focusing on those with the greatest potential to reduce nutrient and sediment pollution. Partners have expressed an interest in considering, in addition to the water quality benefits of

practices, other benefits of BMPs. The 'co-benefits' that we consider can be assessed by the AgWG to identify more holistic approaches to describing the impacts of BMPs. AgWG members have also stressed the importance of considering a broader framework of sustainability to influence the work that we do. Our group can enhance our focus on sustainability, particularly in considering strategies for expanding the adoption of conservation practices among producers.

Actions		
Learning	Leading	Improving
Explore the ways in which BMPs provide value to the environment and to those implementing them beyond reducing nutrient and sediment pollution	Develop list of criteria to use to more comprehensively quantify the value of CBP BMPs	Determine BMPs to incentivize using more holistic evaluation criteria
Review existing or conduct new BMP ROI assessment Invite farmers to share insights into the intersection between profitability and environmental stewardship	Evaluate soil health as a partnership priority	Weave elements of sustainability – particularly as applicable to the viability of agricultural operations – into AgWG discussions.

6) Enhance focus on water quality monitoring data.

The Bay Program's suite of modeling tools helps us track progress toward meeting our pollution reduction targets and serve as a critical planning tool. Several partners have recognized that in addition to considering modeling data, the partnership should more closely consider monitoring data in our evaluations of progress toward achieving our goals. The extent to which monitoring data is considered for accountability is a broader discussion not appropriate for the AgWG, but there are several approaches this group can take to assess ag-sector loads and BMP impact through enhanced focus on monitoring data.

Actions		
Learning	Leading	Improving
Review results of monitoring studies to better understand impact of BMPs	Explore cost-effective monitoring tools/systems	Develop support mechanism for existing local/small ag watershed monitoring network