Updating the Riparian Forest Buffer Outcome

April 2025 Forestry Workgroup

Draft Language to Consider

Restore and conserve forest buffers to maximize benefits for water quality, habitat and people throughout the watershed. Working towards having **75%** of riparian areas forested throughout the watershed, plant and maintain **7500** acres per year of riparian forest buffer and reduce the loss of existing forest buffers to achieve at least **71**% of riparian areas forested by 2035.

Motivation for updating general outcome language

FOREST BUFFER OUTCOME: Continually increase the capacity of forest buffers to provide water quality and habitat benefits throughout the watershed. Restore 900 miles per year of riparian forest buffer and conserve existing buffers until at least 70 percent of riparian areas throughout the watershed are forested.

- Make the benefits to people more explicit
- Make the outcome more relatable and easy to understand
- Add maintenance to outcome language
- Swap out acres for miles
- Consider establishing a longer-term and shorter-term goals

Potential revised outcome language

~~Continually increase the capacity of~~ Restore and conserve forest buffers to maximize benefits for water quality, habitat and people ~~provide water quality and habitat benefits~~ throughout the watershed. ~~Restore~~ Working toward having XX% of riparian areas forested throughout the watershed, plant and maintain X acres ~~900 miles~~ per year of riparian forest buffer and reduce the loss of existing forest buffers to achieve at least X % of riparian areas forested by 2035. ~~and conserve existing buffers until at least 70 percent of riparian areas throughout the watershed are forested~~.

Numeric target updates: Riparian Forest Cover

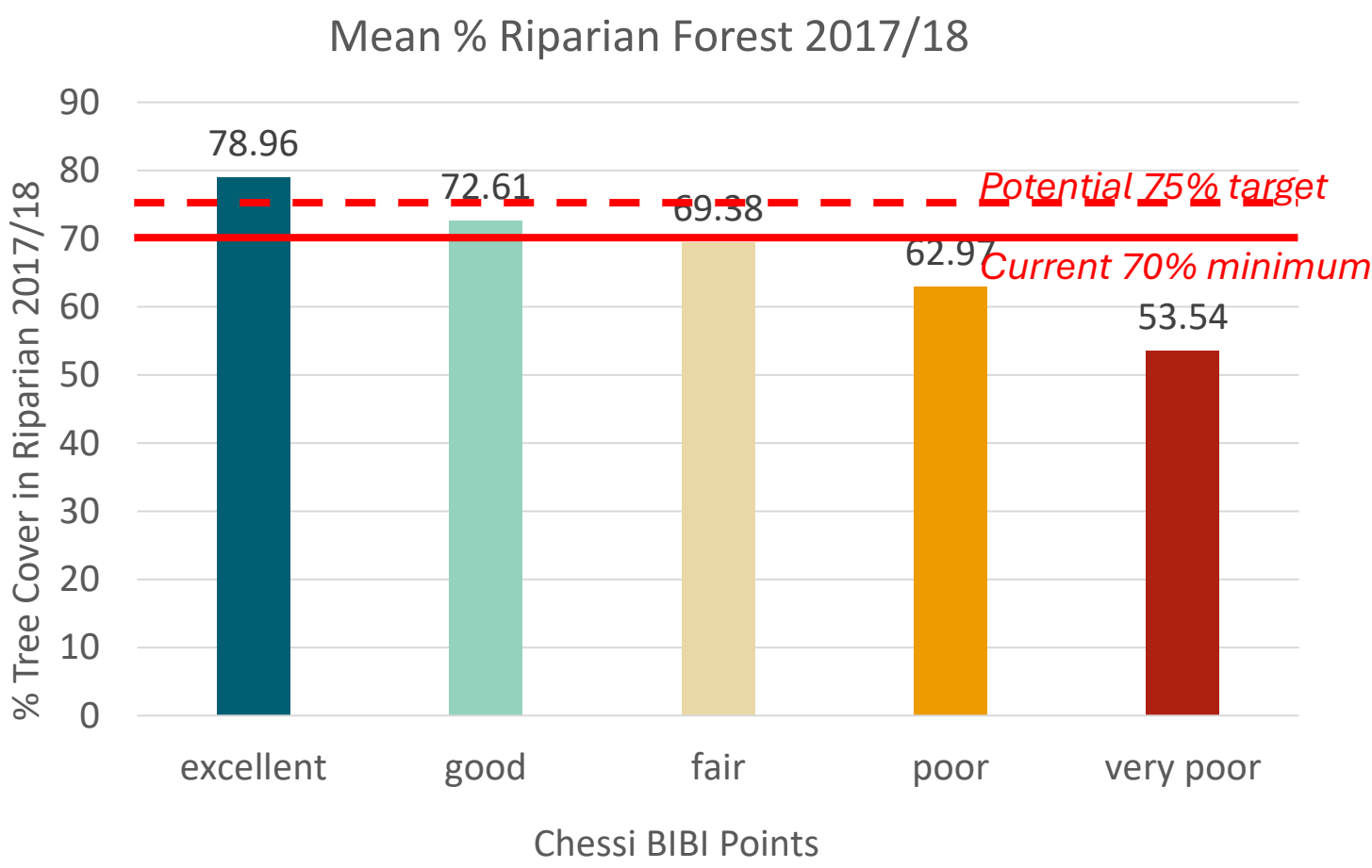
Draft 2024 edition LULC data

Average annual rate of loss (watershed-wide): 5587 acres

Jurisdiction	Riparian Land Area	Forest Cover Acres, 2013/2014	Forest Cover %, 2013/2014	Forest Cover Acres, 2021/2022	Forest Cover %, 2021/2022	Net Change in Acres	Net Change in %
DE	55,140	31,328.2	56.82%	30,991.5	56.21%	-336.8	-0.61%
DC	1,737	1,008.4	58.05%	1,010.6	58.18%	2.2	0.13%
MD	689,035	425,793.7	61.80%	423,965.4	61.53%	-1,828.3	-0.27%
NY	331,622	213,976.2	64.52%	210,985.0	63.62%	-2,991.3	-0.90%
PA	1,422,902	1,005,420.3	70.66%	998,003.9	70.14%	-7,416.4	-0.52%
VA	1,879,844	1,411,746.3	75.10%	1,384,393.7	73.64%	-27,352.6	-1.46%
WV	269,915	206,051.9	76.34%	204,033.5	75.59%	-2,018.3	-0.75%
Total Watershed	4,650,195	3,295,325.0	70.86%	3,253,383.6	**69.96%**	**-41,941.4**	-0.90%

Proposal for numeric target updates: Riparian Forest Cover

- Move away from setting a “minimum” target
- Set 75% as a long-term target to support achieving improved stream health
  - 234,263 additional acres of riparian forest needed to reach 75%
- Set an interim forest cover target for 2035



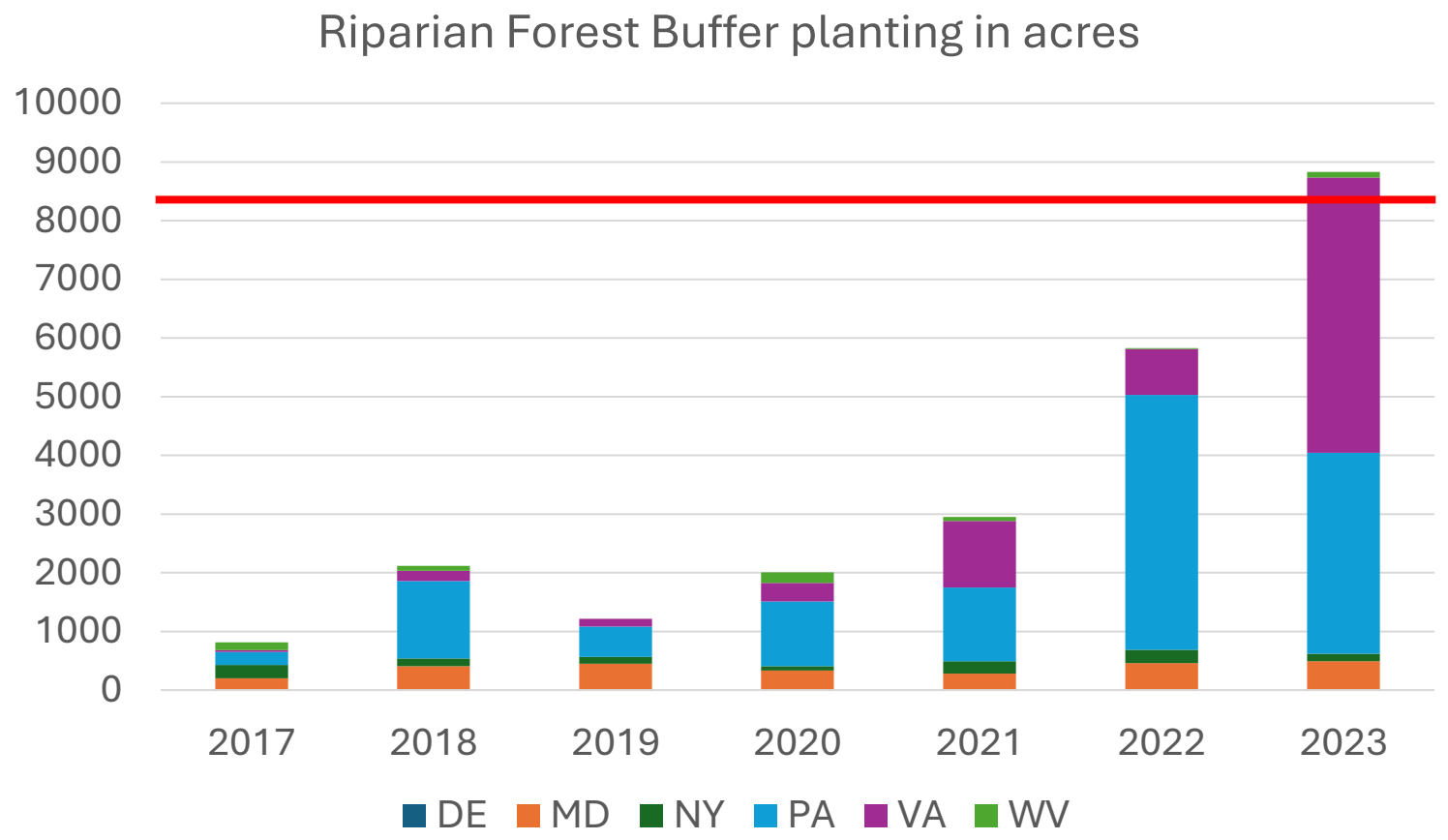
Numeric target updates: Annual planting

- 900 miles/year= 10,909 acres/year (assuming 100 ft buffer widths)

Previous planting rates

- 8,830 acres planted in 2023
- 3,395 acres planted on average 2017-2023
- 5,869 acres planted on average 2021-2023

- To achieve 75% by 2050 (assuming no loss) from 2022 LULC baseline, would need 8,367 acres/year

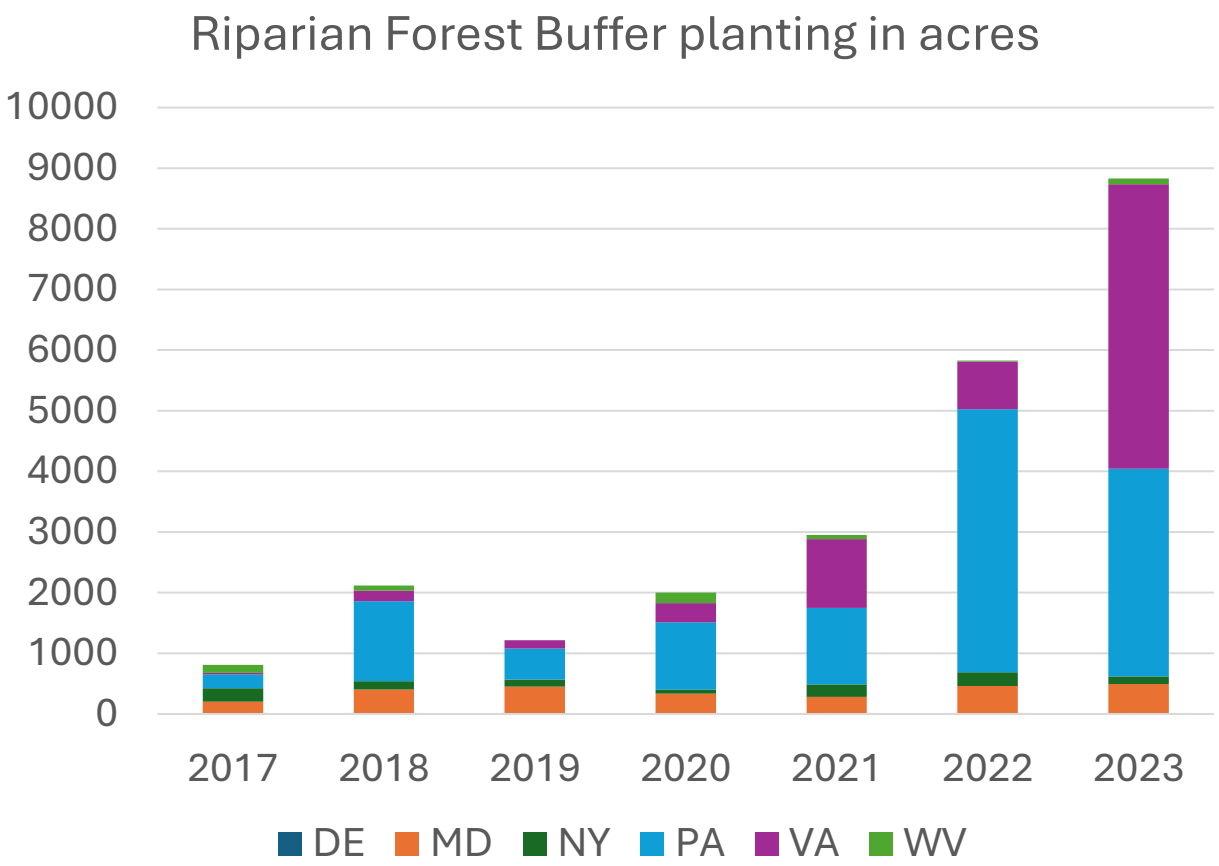


Options for numeric targets

1. No net loss of forest buffers
    - Maintain current 70% buffer coverage through 2035
    - **Plant 5587 acres/yr to keep pace with losses**
    - Pros: On par with average recent high planting rates
    - Cons: Wouldn't put us on track to reach 75% forested
2. 1% gain in riparian forest by 2035 (71% forested)
    - A. Plant 3712 acres/year (assuming no net loss)
    - B. Plant 9298 acres/year (to compensate for average loss rates)
    - **C. Plant 6505 acres/year (to compensate for 50% of average loss rates)**
    - Pros: Would put us on a trajectory to achieve a net gain in forest cover (assuming loss can be reduced) while maintaining realistic planting rates
    - Cons: Reaching 75% forested will take a long time
3. 2% gain in riparian forest by 2035 (72% forested)
    - A. **Plant 7,289 acres/year (assuming no net loss)**
    - B. Plant 12,876 acres/year (to compensate for average loss rates)
    - Pros: Would put us on track to achieve 75% forested by 2035
    - Cons: Planting rates needed to compensate for losses are unrealistic

Calculations based on potential planting targets

Acres/year planted	**7,000**	**7,500**	**8,000**
Total planted to 2035	91,000	97,500	104,000
Forest cover in 2035 (no loss)	3,344,384	3,350,884	3,357,384
% forested 2035 (no loss)	71.92%	72.06%	72.20%
Forest cover in 2035 (maintain current loss)	3,271,758	3,278,258	3,284,758
% forested 2035 (maintain current loss)	70.36%	70.50%	70.64%
Forest cover in 2035 (50% of current loss)	3,308,071	3,314,571	3,321,071
% forested in 2035 (50% of current loss)	71.14%	71.28%	71.42%



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Discussion

Reference slides

FOREST BUFFER OUTCOME

OUTCOME DISPOSITION ADVICE TO MANAGEMENT BOARD:

UPDATE

OUTCOME: Continually increase the capacity of forest buffers to provide water quality and habitat benefits throughout the watershed. Restore 900 miles per year of riparian forest buffer and conserve existing buffers until at least 70 percent of riparian areas throughout the watershed are forested.

RECENT PROGRESS
INCREASE

OUTLOOK
OFF COURSE

GOAL: Vital Habitats
LEAD: Water Quality Goal Team- Forestry Workgroup

Assessment

- Outcome is foundational to meeting multiple Bay Program goals, including water quality goals under the TMDL
- Inclusion of forest buffers in the Agreement has driven increased investments and programmatic focus towards the practice, while enabling greater regional coordination

Recommendations

- Maintain both a riparian forest cover target and an annual planting target in the updated outcome
- Update to re-establish reasonable targets and timelines that are grounded in science
- Update to reflect increased focus on conservation and maintenance

Presented by: Katie Brownson

Feedback from the Feb. Management Board

- Generally broad support for the FWG recommendations
- One vote for consolidating Riparian Forest Buffers and Tree Canopy into a single Forest Outcome
- Support shifting away from miles/year to acres/year
- Support emphasis on maintenance and permanent protection
- Push for more attainable/realistic metrics