



Stakeholders' Advisory Committee
TO THE CHESAPEAKE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

Stakeholders' Advisory Committee
Meeting Minutes
December 10 - 11, 2025
Berkley Springs, WV

Stakeholders' Members Present: John Dawes (remote), Matt Ehrhart, Doug Faulkner, Verna Harrison, Bill Fink (remote) Bobby Hughes, Hamid Karimi, Julie Patton Lawson, David Lillard, Patrick McDonnell (remote), Bill Noftsinger (remote), Abel Olivo (Chair), Kate Patton, Alisonya Poole (remote), Sara Ramotnik, Tim Rupli (remote), Mary Sketch, BeKura Shabazz, Charlie Stek, and Staff: Jess Blackburn & Alex LoCurto

Speakers/Guests Present: Kate Fritz, Dan Coogan, Jen Nelson, Lucinda Power, Erin Vesey, Stephanie Banik, Sabine Miller, Erin Vesey, Kacey Wetzel, Elle Bassett, Amy Handen, Allyson Gibson, Megan Milliken McPherson, Danielle Hamilton, Maya Alexander, Amber Cameron, Kirk Mantay, Kathy Stecker, Maria Russo, Frank Rodgers, Emily Merrill

Meeting presentations and materials are located at:

[Stakeholders' Advisory Committee Quarterly Meeting \(December 2025\) | Chesapeake Bay Program](#)

Thursday, December 10, 2025

The Stakeholders' Advisory Committee Chair, Abel Olivo, called the meeting to order at 10:00 AM. The meeting objectives are (1) Receive briefings on the 2025 Chesapeake Executive Council Meeting actions and next steps; (2) Introduce and converse with the new EPA Chesapeake Bay Program Director; (3) Learn about the Chesapeake Bay Capacity Building Initiative and success stories; (4) Refresh and realign the Stakeholders' subcommittees with consideration of the revised *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement* Goals and Stakeholders' Committee interests.

Business Meeting

- The September 2025 Quarterly Meeting minutes were approved as submitted.
- Abel Olivo reported on the Dec. 2nd CBP Executive Council (EC) meeting. The governors of PA, VA, MD, DE and the Mayor of DC were in attendance. The EC took four key actions: (1) Approved the amended *Watershed Agreement*, setting the partnership's direction through 2040; (2) Approved recommendations to streamline the program's governance and structure with implementation continuing over the next 6 months; (3) Issued a charge to the Principals' Staff Committee (PSC) to advance integrating Tribal partners into the CBP over the next 6 months; (4) Elected PA Governor Josh Shapiro as the Executive Council Chair for 2026.
- Bill Fink, Chair of the Agriculture Advisory Committee (AAC), shared that the AAC had been focused on ensuring that agriculture was adequately reflected in the revised *Watershed Agreement*; which now recognizes agriculture as part of the watershed economy and emphasizes viable farms, economic resiliency, and conserved landscapes as essential to long-term sustainability.
 - The AAC is exploring alternative manure management approaches, including sandboxing projects, in coordination with PA DEP, the Department of Agriculture, and the Bay Program, with the goal of partnering with STAC to advance scalable solutions in Pennsylvania.
- Kate Fritz reported that CBP and EPA leadership reaffirmed the value of the advisory committees and the Alliance remains committed supporting the Stakeholders' Committee. As IJJA funding sunsets, CBP is reviewing cost-saving measures; the Stakeholders' Committee has received incremental funding through March, with EPA indicating that a lapse in support is not expected, though future funding structures may change.
- Julie Lawson, as chair of the Nominations subcommittee, offered the nominations memo with Abel Olivo and Sara Ramotnik as chair and vice-chair respectively. The Stakeholders' Advisory Committee unanimously voted to confirm the nominations. Members thanked David Lillard and Kate Patton for their service on the Committee.

Chesapeake Bay Program Updates

Lucinda Power, Branch Chief, Partnerships and Accountability, EPA CBP

The Partnership has finalized the revisions to the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*, and set a 2040 horizon with a 2033 midpoint review, extended implementation periods to six years, and committed to more frequent public updates. Next steps for the *Watershed Agreement* include developing management strategies that are easier to understand and apply, with a new template emphasizing signatory commitments, statutory authorities, and resource needs being finalized for review by March.

Responding to the EC's charge, the PSC is streamlining governance and structure to improve efficiency by clarifying decision-making authority, strengthening federal coordination through EPA, reassessing consensus voting, exploring supermajority voting, and updating roles across the partnership. The Program plans to eliminate the Management Board, pending July 1 approval, and will define how policy and implementation move forward without it. The new structure centers on the Executive Council and Policy Steering Committee for leadership, four goal teams for implementation, and continued advisory committee input, with final updates due by July 1, 2026.

In January 2025, the Indigenous Conservation Council (ICC) requested EC signatory status, Indigenous Guardian Grant support, and an Indigenous Advisory Committee. In October 2025, the Partnership moved to integrate Tribal participation through the Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) to better incorporate Indigenous knowledge. The EC has charged the PSC to work with the ICC over the next 6 months to clarify partnership roles, define what signatory status would entail, and develop recommendations which are due by July 1, 2026 alongside governance updates.

Near-term CBP priorities include finalizing management strategies, advancing Phase 7 model development to support new water quality targets by 2029–2030, developing and implementing the 2026–2027 water quality milestones, and meeting the charges from the Executive Council by July 1, 2026.

No Decisions or Actions taken after the session.

Member Questions & Discussion

- ❖ *What are the consequences for jurisdictions not meeting the midpoint assessment?:* Strengthening accountability is a top priority for the Governance and Structure Team. While EPA retains regulatory authority under the Clean Water Act, the *Watershed Agreement* is voluntary, so accountability focuses on transparently reporting progress and explanations for delays to partners and the public.
- ❖ *How will progress be publicized to ensure transparency, without focusing on consequences?:* For transparency, the program uses Chesapeake Progress, collecting data from jurisdictions to show where goals are on or off track; updates to the public will continue through 2040. The Bay Barometer and management strategies are additional tools to communicate progress and highlight areas needing accelerated effort.
- ❖ *Where will Chesapeake Progress 2014 Data be stored?:* The 2014 data is not disappearing; it's being archived temporarily while the website is updated to reflect the amended *Agreement*. The public will still have access to this information.

Chesapeake Bay Capacity Building Initiative Panel Discussion

Megan Milliken, Executive Director, Chesapeake Bay Funders Network

Danielle Hamilton, Program Manager, Chesapeake Bay Trust

Amber Cameron, Program Officer, Chesapeake Bay Trust

Elle Bassett, Riverkeeper, Arundel Rivers Federation

Kirk Mantay, Executive Director, Green Trust Alliance

Maya Alexander, Director of Community Engagement, Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley

Allyson Gibson, Executive Director, Lancaster Clean Water Partners

The session features how targeted support improves project delivery and environmental outcomes. The Capacity Building Initiative addresses a regional funding gap by strengthening the organizational capacity of small, community-based groups to scale-up their impact, strengthen operations, and deliver measurable restoration results

that advance Chesapeake Bay restoration. By investing in core infrastructure, the Initiative helps organizations better access funding, manage resources, and deliver on-the-ground results. The Bay Trust administers the Initiative on behalf of the Funders Network, through a transparent, peer-review process and continually refines it based on feedback. The Trust also prioritizes applicant support by offering one-on-one guidance, pre-submission feedback, and follow-up support to strengthen future proposals.

Grant support has helped groups merge and stabilize, build staff and governance capacity, leverage additional funding, and coordinate large multi-partner networks. These investments have accelerated outcomes, from nutrient and sediment reductions to living shorelines, stream restoration, and green infrastructure, while expanding technical expertise and regional collaboration. Collectively, these efforts demonstrate how targeted capacity building strengthens local leadership, supports underserved communities, and advances large-scale Chesapeake Bay restoration goals.

Actions

- Reach out to Funders Network and CCWC to compile list of partners from across the watershed
- Compile list of groups and projects that were funded by a capacity building grant (NFWF)

Member Questions & Discussion

- ❖ *Is EPA funding being funneled through NFWF?*: No, in the current program iteration, EPA funds are directed to the Chesapeake Bay Trust through a competitive process. NFWF is still an active partner, but it does not provide direct funding for capacity building as it did historically.
- ❖ *How are small organizations developing skills for high-quality restoration project management?*: One of the first steps for the workgroup is a gap analysis of workforce technical expertise across outcomes. Many outcomes haven't met targets due to a lack of technical expertise, so this analysis will identify where support is needed.
- ❖ *Can a small community organization apply for funding without losing its autonomy or change its mission?*: Yes, the program is designed to be self-directed. Applicants identify their own priorities and needs, and the funding supports those goals. Capacity building projects range widely and organizations choose what fits their context. The program does not impose top-down requirements, and staff work closely with applicants to strengthen proposals while respecting each organization's identity.
- ❖ *Do you have the capacity to expand your capacity, what would it take?*: Expanding capacity primarily comes down to funding with additional dollars going to scale-up staff support. Beyond funding, capacity also depends on staff time and recruitment to handle increased applicant numbers efficiently.

Discussion with new Chesapeake Bay Program Director

Dan Coogan, Director Chesapeake Bay Program (remote)

Chesapeake Bay Program Director has served at the EPA for 20 years, starting in executive positions during the first Trump administration. His experience includes a focus on efficiency, streamlining operations, identifying areas for cost savings, as well as managing EPA's COVID-19 response, and leading the implementation of the IJA and IRA grant programs.

Under the current administration, Dan reviewed EPA spending to align with administration priorities. In coordination with DOGE, EPA reduced spending and terminated several grants, positioning the agency to implement the Big Beautiful Bill, which rescinded most IRA programs, except for the Clean Ports Program. His three current priorities: (1) Supporting all Bay watershed partnerships and jurisdictions, especially headwater states, to ensure everyone is engaged; (2) Improving federal coordination; and (3) Reviewing EPA funding to ensure alignment with the Clean Water Act and Congressional appropriations.

Regarding his vision for the Bay Program, he emphasized maintaining momentum in the partnership while remaining adaptable and dynamic. He seeks to honor existing successes while introducing new ideas and approaches that support restoration efforts and long-term goals. On advisory committee engagement, Dan highlighted his view

that the Advisory Committees' fundamental purpose is to inform policymaking and provide recommendations that can lead to tangible outcomes.

Member Questions & Discussion

- ❖ *How will EPA coordinate regulatory efforts with voluntary programs effectively to prevent backsliding?* There are weekly check-ins on major issues with our regional administrator to ensure consistency across the agency. We work closely across the Mid-Atlantic region divisions to ensure a coordinated approach on Bay matters, including enforcement, permitting, and voluntary programs.
- ❖ *How do you see your relationships with the advisory committees in the future?:* The Director wants to understand operationally how advisory committees are functioning while ensuring they maintain independence to provide expert advice. He is indirectly connected through oversight of EPA funding that supports the committees and is reviewing that process to ensure resources are used effectively.

Local Watershed Context

Maria Russo, Policy Specialist West Virginia Rivers Coalition

Frank Rodgers, Executive Director Cacapon Institute

Emily Merrill, Executive Director Cacapon & Lost Rivers Land Trust

The West Virginia Rivers Coalition focuses on promoting clean water policies. They advocate in WV through bill tracking, lobbying, and amplifying citizen voices. Recent successes in WV include the PFAS Protection Act, which was passed after USGS sampling revealed widespread contamination in community water systems. In 2023, Maria led lobbying efforts urging WV DEP to create PFAS action plans, generated broad public support and secured 85% approval in the WV state legislature.

The Cacapon Institute leads West Virginia's largest volunteer tree-planting program, distributing over 1,000 trees annually across more than 600 sites. The Institute focuses on DIY BMPs, tree planting, and urban forestry, particularly in rapidly developing areas of the Eastern Panhandle. Educational programs, including Growing Natives and Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences (MWEEs) based curricula, engage students in hands-on stewardship, building environmental literacy while improving stormwater management, air quality, and community health.

The Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust focuses on the 680-square-mile Cacapon watershed- a highly forested, biodiverse Potomac tributary with farms, recreation, and numerous rare species. The watershed faces growing development and utility-scale pressures that threaten forests, farms, and habitat connectivity. The Land Trust protects over 15,000 acres through conservation easements and a hub-and-corridor strategy, connecting forests, rivers, and farms to sustain water quality, wildlife, and climate resilience.

Friday, December 12, 2025

The meeting was reconvened at 8:30AM.

Member Reflections and Discussion

Members noted comments from the CBP Director that one of the ways to measure the success of an advisory committee is how often a recommendation is translated into action. Members agreed to send a letter to Director Coogan highlighting past Stakeholders' Committee recommendations. The Committee discussed the email from Dan calling for a pause of CBP workgroup activities. They agreed that since the Advisory Committees were not explicitly named in stop-work-order, they should continue operating as normal. Members emphasized careful communication, strategic topic focus, and providing honest advice without fear of repercussion.

Coordinator's Report

Jess shared a snapshot of activities that the Stakeholders' Committee undertook in 2025, including: advising on the *Watershed Agreement* revisions, participating in CBP blogs, discussing sandboxing, workforce development, indigenous knowledge and Tribal partnership, and the CBP budget, governance and structure.

Refreshing the Stakeholders' Subcommittees

Members discussed realigning the Stakeholders' topical subcommittees and priorities around the new goals and outcomes of the *Watershed Agreement*. A Mentimeter poll showed interest in stronger engagement with PSC representatives and participation in developing management strategy templates and plans. Members expressed the greatest interest in the Clean Water and Healthy Landscapes goals. Priority topics for the next one to two years included accountability (13), funding (7), state leadership (3), and data centers (3), as well as trees, policy, and water quality.

Members noted concerns about insufficient regulation and enforcement, limited public engagement, and the need for the leadership to meet program deadlines. Despite decades of *Agreements*, progress has fallen short, and strengthening accountability is central to the Committee's mission.

Decisions: Following discussion and voting, the Stakeholders' Committee formed three topical subcommittees: Clean Water, Living Resources, and Engaged Communities. An Accountability Workgroup was formed to focus on defining what accountability should look like for the CBP, EPA, and overall goal progress. The group will develop a clear framework and integrate accountability as a cross-cutting priority across all three topical subcommittees. Subcommittee membership will be coordinated via email in January and February 2026 before subcommittee officer elections.

Action Items:

- Distribute the transcript of Dan Coogan's comments to the Committee
- Compile and distribute a list of the networks across the watershed
- Distribute a list of projects and groups that were funded through the capacity building grant
- Gather and distribute resources and research on health benefits of trees and forests
- Draft a letter of successes of the Stakeholders' Committee (past 10-15 years) and share with Dan
- Jess will coordinate with other ACs about whether a joint letter offering AC participation in governance and structure updates is needed; Would be ideal to have the list of successes included in the joint letter

The meeting adjourned at 12:00PM.

Stakeholders' Advisory Committee 2026 Meeting Dates

Virtual: Thursday, February 19

Hybrid: May 20-21 in Lancaster, PA (overlapping with the Choose Clean Water Coalition conference)

Hybrid: September 16-17, location TBD

Virtual: Friday, December 11

The Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay is honored to support the appointed volunteers of the Stakeholders' Advisory Committee. We are committed to serving as an unbiased convener so the members can achieve their mission through learning and discussion. Views expressed by the members and their guest speakers are not those of the Alliance.