



**Stakeholders' Members Present:** Mary Sketch Bryant, Matt Ehrhart, Doug Faulkner, Bill Fink, Verna Harrison, Ann Jurczyk, Hamid Karimi, Julie Lawson, Joseph Maroon, Patrick McDonnell, Bill Noftsinger, Alisonya Poole, Sara Ramotnik, BeKura Shabazz, Charlie Stek, and staff Jess Blackburn and Alex LoCurto.

**Speakers/Guests Present:** Kate Fritz, Amy Handen, Marty Qually, Mel Skirkanich, Kathy Stecker, Jim Sullivan, Erin Vesey, Rachel Felver, Laura Cattell Noll, Josh Hastings, Lucinda Power, Jill Whitcomb, Kristin Saunders, Meg Cole, Matt Robinson, Karl Blankenship, Jessica Shirley, Doug Bell, Suzanne Trevena, David Bulova, Adrienne Kotula, Karl Blankenship, Leila Duman, Melissa Ehrenreich

**Meeting presentations and materials are located at:**

[Stakeholders' Advisory Committee Quarterly Meeting \(February 2026\) | Chesapeake Bay Program](#)

### **Thursday, February 19, 2026**

The Stakeholders' Advisory Committee Vice-Chair, Sara Ramotnik, called the meeting to order at 9:30 AM. The meeting objectives are (1) Conversations with Principals' Staff Committee (PSC) leaders from Pennsylvania and Virginia; (2) Receive a briefing on the annual Bay Barometer progress report; and (3) 2025 Executive Council (EC) follow-up on briefings on implementing the EC charges for Governance and Structure and Integrating sovereign Federal Tribes and Indigenous knowledge and to review the EC's response to the Stakeholders' Committee letter of recommendations.

### **Business Meeting**

- The December 2025 Quarterly Meeting minutes were approved as submitted.
- Bill Fink, Chair of the Agriculture Advisory Committee (AAC), shared that the PSC responded to their December recommendations, which emphasized opportunities for agricultural education and literacy, healthy landscapes, and collaboration across advisory committees. At the upcoming Bay in the Balance Conference, the members will participate in a Producers' Panel focused on accelerating the adoption of conservation practices on farms. Additional priorities include defining and elevating soil health, and exploring pay-for-performance approaches that benefit both farmers and the environment.
- Josh Hastings, Vice-Chair of the Local Government Advisory Committee (LGAC), shared that over the past year, LGAC has focused on how local government officials can best support the goals of the CBP. At their upcoming March meeting in Gettysburg, members will review recent structural changes within the CBP and discuss how those changes affect their work. The committee continues to prioritize peer-to-peer learning opportunities, including a planned tour of the Delmarva Peninsula in April. LGAC also aims to strengthen engagement with the Maryland and Pennsylvania Municipal Leagues, including a joint summer tour focused on stormwater containment practices. The committee is interested in improving access to data and planning tools that help local governments plan more effectively.
- Meg Cole, Science and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) Coordinator, reported that STAC will host a meeting on embedding social science into large-scale water quality programs and expand Indigenous representation through standing appointments and engagement with tribal networks. The committee supports governance, adaptive management, and translating science into implementation, and promotes a "learning while doing" approach. Upcoming work includes an April discussion reviewing *Agreement* outcomes and a June meeting at NCTC to set priorities. STAC's technical work includes the ongoing Living Resources Habitat Feasibility Assessment which came out of the CESR report.

## **Conversation With New PSC Chair**

*Jessica Shurtle, Secretary, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection*

Secretary Shirley shared that she assumed the role of PA DEP Secretary in an acting capacity in October 2023 and received legislative confirmation in June 2025. Shirley noted that Pennsylvania has developed a clear vision for advancing Chesapeake Bay restoration by expanding its stakeholder network and bringing more partners into the process since launching a broad stakeholder engagement effort in 2017. She emphasized the importance of continually evaluating policies, adapting to new challenges, and maintaining momentum.

Several current initiatives support both local water quality and Chesapeake Bay restoration, including efforts to: modernize state sewage regulations; update biosolids permits to address contaminants such as PFAS and phosphorus; and improve management of food processing residuals. The department also continues to invest in restoration and conservation programs across the state. Through the Growing Greener Program, Pennsylvania recently funded 89 projects, many within the Chesapeake Bay watershed. The state also continues to expand the Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program (ACAP) and implement abandoned mine land restoration projects funded through federal programs. Additional efforts include the Clean Water Procurement Program, a pay-for-performance initiative that supports water quality improvements in the Conowingo Reservoir Watershed, as well as the recent finalization of the state's environmental justice policy.

## **Member Questions & Discussion**

- ❖ *What is the Shapiro Administration's position regarding potential increases to ACAP or Growing Greener, as well as the overall trajectory of these programs?:* ACAP funds county conservation districts to support watershed work on farms. Growing Greener funding may decline as part of it comes from the oil and gas impact fee, though Governor Shapiro has continued investing in DEP. Many legislators are unfamiliar with Growing Greener but respond positively when they see local benefits. While addressing the \$30 million shortfall in the Hazardous Sites Cleanup Fund remains a priority, we continue educating lawmakers about Growing Greener to support future funding requests.
- ❖ *Could you explain how the PA State Conservation Commission, DEP, and Department of Agriculture work together, especially on agricultural issues?:* The State Conservation Commission (SCC) bridges DEP, the Department of Agriculture, and farmers, supporting conservation on soil, open space, and farmland. The SCC works with county conservation commissions to provide local support to farmers, watershed groups, and municipalities. Partnering with municipalities ensures effective, trusted implementation.
- ❖ *Pennsylvania advisory committee members will meet next month on governance and structure. Will other jurisdictions have a chance to hold similar discussions and provide feedback?:* Marty Qually, LGAC Chair, serves as the liaison to collect feedback from all four advisory committees for the Signatory Implementation Team. PA's meetings gather governance feedback and maintain routine engagement. Feedback directly from committee members carries more weight than jurisdiction-to-jurisdiction communication, and we plan to encourage states to do the same.

## **Conversation With New Virginia Leadership**

*David Bulova, Secretary, Virginia Natural and Historic Resources*

Secretary Bulova emphasized the importance of dialogue to understand stakeholders' priorities and how his office can support their work. His professional background spans 20 years in the House of Delegates and extensive work in stormwater management, Chesapeake Bay restoration, and water resources finance. Early in his career, he worked at the Northern Virginia Regional Commission, which shaped his watershed-focused, collaborative approach to environmental management.

He highlighted three guiding principles: people at the center, prevention over "cures", and breaking down silos. Engaging stakeholders and the public fosters stewardship, while the new Office of Outdoor Recreation and environmental education initiatives connect Virginians with natural resources. He stressed proactive investment in infrastructure and pollution prevention, focusing on nitrogen, phosphorus, sediment, PFAS, invasive species, data

centers, and climate impacts. He also values innovative technologies that address challenges efficiently. Looking ahead, Bulova emphasized exceeding Chesapeake Bay restoration goals and seeking input on where Virginia can lead. His focus remains on advancing restoration efforts, accelerating progress, and ensuring that well-developed strategies translate into tangible outcomes.

### **Member Questions & Discussion**

- ❖ *How does affordability factor into Bay initiatives, and what are Spanbergers' Administration priorities?:* Affordability is a key focus for the Governor and General Assembly. Short-term priorities include fully funding agricultural BMP cost-share programs, upgrading wastewater treatment plants, and supporting the Stormwater Local Assistance Fund to meet watershed goals. We welcome stakeholder input on ways Virginia can exceed its Chesapeake Bay restoration targets.
- ❖ *What is the real impact of the Potomac sewer spill on the Bay and human health?:* Our Department of Environmental Quality, Health Department, and Department of Emergency Management are coordinating with Maryland and DC, and conducting downstream testing to assess impacts on natural resources and public health. Even if seafood is safe, public perception of sewage in the water is a concern. We need to better translate the technical work into clear, digestible information so the public understands the response and can have confidence in the collaboration across agencies.
- ❖ *With recent budget cuts to the Bay Journal and advisory committees, will the PSC have a role in future budget decisions under the new structure?:* While the exact structure is still unclear, there is absolutely strong support for ensuring these programs are fully funded. Stakeholder groups and resources like the *Bay Journal* are essential to the Bay Program's success, and advocating for adequate funding will remain a priority.
- ❖ *Is the Pay-for-Outcomes pilot program likely to continue, and are there any updates from the session?:* It's a fantastic program. We'll know Sunday if it's included in the budget. If not, it's just because we want to show proof of concept over the next couple of years. Given the demand, there's strong interest in continuing the program beyond the pilot.
- ❖ *What is the Administration's approach to menhaden management, both in the Chesapeake and Atlantic?:* There's a major gap in Chesapeake Bay menhaden data, so we hope this year's state budget funds a robust Virginia Institute of Marine Science study on menhaden populations and their role in the ecosystem. Overfishing harms both the species and commercial interests, so this study will guide informed management decisions.

### **Presentation: Bay Barometer**

*Rachel Felver, Communications Director, Chesapeake Bay Program*

This is the final Bay Barometer to report on progress from the 2014 *Watershed Agreement*. 17 of 31 Outcomes had 2025 data updates, some were last refreshed in 2023 or 2024 that reflected updates already approved on Chesapeake Progress or via press releases. The report shows sustainable fisheries (108M blue crabs; oysters complete), habitat gains (wetlands, black duck, brook trout, fish passage), nearly complete riparian forest cover, 17,000 acres of trees planted, and mixed water quality improvements (BMPs reducing nitrogen, phosphorus, sediment). Impervious surface increased in some sub-watersheds. Engaged communities progress includes 76% of agencies prepared for environmental literacy and 27 new public access sites, exceeding the 2025 target. Updated reporting under the revised *Agreement* will resume in 2026 and will be available on Chesapeake Data.

Link added after the presentation: [2024-2025 Bay Barometer](#)

### **Member Questions & Discussion**

- ❖ *How is outcome progress verified?:* Outcome data is submitted by jurisdictions and workgroups, then thoroughly quality controlled before review by the relevant workgroup as well as an indicators coordinator. Multiple levels of verification ensure accuracy before data is published.
- ❖ *How should the Bay Barometer balance reporting successes with educating the public on ongoing challenges, so readers understand the complexity and don't lose trust in management actions?:* The report will highlight

progress while remaining transparent about challenges, providing context and details to help the public understand complex outcomes like forestry, water quality, and fisheries. Messaging emphasizes both accomplishments and the work still needed under the revised *Watershed Agreement*.

### **Presentation: Proposed Changes to CBP Governance and Structure**

*Doug Bell, Senior Technical Advisory, EPA CBP Office*

Doug shared that the main structural changes include: eliminating the Management Board; consolidating six Goal Teams into four to align with the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*; and clarifying the CBP support roles. He outlined updates to the Governance and Management Framework, including the partnership's Principles and commitments to diversity, equity, and ethics. He noted that federal leadership engagement is increasing through regular meetings and coordination across agencies. The team is also standardizing Goal Team operations and support functions while balancing flexibility. Additionally, the Governance framework will clarify decision-making processes, public meeting participation, and methods for tracking accountability. Finally, Doug described the schedule for drafting and reviewing the revised framework. The Implementation Team will share a markup internally on March 20, discuss it on March 26, and release it to the Management Board on April 5. Pennsylvania leads the drafting coordination for PSC and Advisory Committee sections of the document. Doug offered to connect participants with section authors for additional guidance or input. Advisory Committees are encouraged to provide input to the Signatory Team via Marty Qually and Management Board leading up to the April 7th PSC.

### **Member Questions & Discussion**

- ❖ *With the PSC changing its name from the Principals' to the Policy Steering Committee, does membership change?:* One minor adjustment involves federal representation: the federal chair will be a political appointee, typically the EPA Regional Administrator, to ensure policy focus. Beyond that, no major membership changes are expected.
- ❖ *Why was 2033 chosen for the independent evaluation? Concern that it falls halfway through the timeline, leaving little time to adjust if progress lags. Should evaluations occur more frequently?:* The 2033 evaluation introduces a more formal, potentially third-party review, building on the program's existing two-year Strategy Review System check-ins. While the timing is still conceptual, quarterly PSC meetings and shorter interim assessments could provide more frequent updates on implementation and progress.
- ❖ *How is the program meaningfully engaging communities of color and frontline communities, especially given the technical nature of much of the work?:* The Program is beginning to incorporate engagement plans into management strategies, with a focus on setting clear criteria to track accountability, measure progress, and ensure underserved communities are involved early in project planning and scoping.

### **Presentation: Tribal Partnership in the Chesapeake Bay Program**

*Leila Duman, Chesapeake & Coastal Bays Restoration Officer, MD Department of Natural Resources*

*Melissa Ann Ehrenreich, Executive Director, Indigenous Conservation Council of the Chesapeake Bay*

Leila Duman, Maryland's MB member, introduced the Executive Council's 2025 charge to include tribes as formal partners in the Chesapeake Bay Program. The request came from the Indigenous Conservation Council (ICC), representing seven federally recognized VA tribes, which asked to become an *Agreement* signatory, establish a funded Indigenous Guardianship Program, and add a standing seat on STAC to recognize Indigenous knowledge. In response, a signatory team of state representatives, tribal liaisons, and experts was formed in January 2026 to work with tribes, develop recommendations, and present drafts to the PSC. Initial meetings in February focused on clarifying tribal interests, participation models, and potential implementation projects.

Maryland's approach focuses on "future-proofing" the partnership by balancing inclusivity with accountability. Key issues include defining signatory roles, clarifying the scope of an Indigenous Guardianship Program, aligning it with *Agreement* outcomes, and determining eligibility for federal funding while incorporating

Indigenous knowledge and expanding engagement with Maryland's state-recognized tribes. Draft recommendations will go to the PSC in April 2026, with final approval targeted for June 30, 2026.

Melissa Ann Ehrenreich highlighted progress in integrating Indigenous knowledge into the CBP, noting that Indigenous stewardship enhances biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and ecosystem health beyond Western science alone. The ICC has joined the Tribal Stewardship and Sovereignty Network to share lessons from global Indigenous Guardians programs and protect tribal sovereignty. Ehrenreich also outlined initiatives to strengthen tribal engagement, including reviewing governance models, developing tribal land metrics with USGS, and exploring funding to build capacity. She concluded by asking the group to consider where Tribal partnerships could have the most impact in improving Chesapeake Bay health.

### **Member Questions & Discussion**

- ❖ *How much can the ICC or other tribes participate in the CBP without federal support?:* We are exploring ways to strengthen tribal capacity but it would not be fair for Tribes to be included in the partnership and not receive federal funding. There are federal treaty obligations that need to be upheld in these conversations.
- ❖ *How does the Bay Program define stewardship, and how flexible is tribal participation as signatories if political or resource pressures affect their capacity?:* Signatories voluntarily support the *Agreement's* goals, with participation varying by resources and interests. Tribes are exploring flexible contributions, like ecosystem indicators, soil health, and food sovereignty, while leveraging funding to engage meaningfully.

### **Coordinator's Report**

Jess reviewed progress on action items from the December meeting. She highlighted completed tasks, including sharing Dan Coogan's remarks, resources on the health benefits of trees, and a list of organizations receiving Bay Trust capacity-building grants. She updated the group on the ongoing effort of compiling a table of Stakeholders Advisory Committee successes over the past 17 years to inform a letter to the Bay Program Office Director. Jess summarized subcommittee updates and next steps for priority setting. The short-term Accountability Workgroup will focus on state progress, leadership, funding, and EPA oversight, with near-term opportunities tied to governance, management strategies, and responses to Executive Council and advisory committee recommendations.

### **Member Reflections and Discussion**

The group discussed subcommittee priorities, communication challenges, and recent watershed issues. They highlighted the need to align subcommittee size with responsibilities, define roles and outcomes, balance expertise, and prepare for upcoming work. Participants stressed making technical information accessible to the public, addressing funding needs, and carefully planning around complex issues like the Potomac sewage spill. The group agreed to continue discussions on communications strategies, focusing on clear objectives, committee roles, and long-term infrastructure impacts.

### **Action Items:**

- Explore ways to make technical information more understandable and accessible to the public, possibly integrating communications into subcommittee work or setting up a discussion on best practices.
- Monitor upcoming Notice of Funding Opportunity for advisory committee support.
- Plan a potential briefing session on the Potomac sewage spill and broader aging infrastructure issues, including who to invite, expected outcomes, and scope of discussion.

The meeting adjourned at 3:00PM.

### **Stakeholders' Advisory Committee 2026 Meeting Dates**

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