Chesapeake Bay Program
Science. Restoration. Partnership.

Forestry Workgroup Minutes

February 4th, 2026
9:00 am - 11:00 am
Visit the meeting webpage for meeting materials and additional information.

Purpose:
- Share information between the Bay Program and Forestry Workgroup partners
- Discuss an effort to explore leveraging remote sensing for the verification of Riparian Forest Buffer BMPs
- Learn about the scenarios needed to develop water quality planning targets and the Forestry Workgroup's role in updating these scenarios for Phase 7
- Receive timely federal policy and budget updates
- Discuss priorities for our meetings in 2026
- Begin exploring priorities for the new Forest Conservation target in the revised 2025 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement

Minutes

I. Announcements
- Upcoming STAC workshop: Healthy Forests: Proactive Strategies for Managing Threats and Promoting Conservation (Feb 24-25 in Frederick, MD)
- Updates from the Bay Program on Management Strategies and Goal Team leadership
  - The Management Board and PSC decided that the Program will develop a single strategic plan that includes four goal management strategies as chapters. The outcome-level strategies would be sub-chapters. A template for the new Management Strategies will be approved no later than June.
- Multiple NFWF funding opportunities available
  - Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Reduction Grants- Pre-proposals due Feb 12th
  - Small Watersheds Grants- Proposals due April 2nd
  - Chesapeake WILD Grants- Proposals due April 9th
- CSS Harvested Forest for Phase 7 - To implement the Timber Harvest Task Force Recommendations (approved by the FWG and the WQ GIT), Phase 7 will include a new "CSS Harvested Forest" land use.
  - This land use would only apply if: (1) harvested forest is mapped within the CSS footprint or (2) in the rare circumstances where a given modeling segment does not have sufficient non-CSS harvestable forest (forest patches >10 acres) to apply the amount of harvested forest allocated to that modeling segment. In the case of option 2, CSS Harvested Forest would be pulled from CSS Forest. If these acres were not needed to meet that modeling segment's proportional allocation, they would remain as CSS Forest. The same BMPs can be applied to both (non-CSS) Harvested Forest and CSS Harvested Forest.

II. **Round Robin**
   ● **West Virginia: Frank Rodgers** shared that they are preparing for spring planting season. Morgan County plans to plant 250 trees to celebrate the United States 250th anniversary. The three eastern panhandle counties are on track for meaningful MWEE's for fourth grade students.
   ● **Virginia: Meghan Mulroy-Goldman** shared that they are currently in the plan review phase of their Riparian Forest for Landowners program. The Virginia Trees for Clean Water program is also currently open for applications, and the Southern Group of State Foresters Water Resources Committee and Forest Health Committee are currently meeting in Charlottesville. They are covering items such as agency and state updates, the BMP implementation report, Bay Program updates, and other related topics. **Craig Highfield** shared that they will be planting 30 acres this spring in the Potomac and Shenandoah watershed areas
   ● **D.C.: Robert Corletta** shared that planting efforts are halted until the ice thaws and the snow melts. There is also a new representative from DOEE, Brendan Durkin. Erica Carlson has moved on from DOEE.
   ● **Maryland: Anne Hairston-Strang** shared the link to the Maryland DNR [restoration mapper](#), built on Chesapeake Conservancy data. They are also getting ready for spring planting season, as well as publicity for the Backyard Buffer program. There is a new public information officer, Samantha Crane, with the 5 Million Trees program, and the program is already at a million and a half trees. **Alanna Crowley** shared that they are also making good progress with the Backyard Buffer program. **Dan Coy** shared that the Maryland Urban and Community Forest Council has a new set of bylaws, and are hoping to do some membership campaigns as well as expand the group's support of urban and community forestry around the state. **Craig Highfield** shared that the Maryland Forest Service foresters will work with the Healthy Forest Healthy Waters program to plant 190 acres of forest this spring and will be doing additional upland planting with state parks. **Nancy Sonti** [shared a report](#) from a project addressing regional tree supply challenges and opportunities led by Deb Hilbert and Andrew Coser. **Rob Schnabel** shared that CBF has their annual Mountains to Bay Grazing Conference on February 18th, you can read more about it [here](#). Their volunteer planting season starts on March 21st.
   ● **Delaware: Chris Miller** shared that they have a state contract for the Bare Root Seedlings planting. There is currently a forester position open, the position is listed [here](#). They have also been giving feedback on a potential bill for the upcoming year for protections for non-tidal wetlands. The silvicultural exemption would be maintained in the new legislation.
   ● **Pennsylvania: Ned Brockmeyer** shared that there is $9 million going out for community and forestry partners, and the next grant year is already opened, and will be open until April. They have also received a NFWF grant for some urban and community forestry work on private property that they are hoping to get started in early 2027. Kaleia London moved on so PA is trying to get a new contract to hire a tree equity specialist sometime over the summer. **Robbie Coville** shared that they will soon be announcing the first Mid-Atlantic Agroforestry Conference organized by Penn State on June 4th and 5th. **Craig Highfield** shared that 125 acres of new forest buffer will be planted in the spring in PA as well.
   ● **New York: Cassandra Davis** shared that the Regenerate New York Forestry Cost Share grant program is available for upland afforestation projects that are over 5 acres or for

projects that would help establish a healthy forest. **Ava Glasser** shared that they are getting started on two of their upland planting programs. One of them is the Community Restoration Grant through the state, and the other is with the Nature Conservancy, Planting with Purpose. The Trees for Tributaries program is running again.

Requested Action: Non-decisional

III. [**Potential Roles for Remote Sensing to Inform Riparian Forest Buffer BMP Verification**](#)

- Discussion summary (in response to questions at the end of the powerpoint presentation, see the meeting materials link above to access the presentation):
    - **Anne Hairston-Strang:** I don't know of any buffer that goes in with just one program or player, there is a lot of complexity there. We have been pretty comfortable using the existing LULC products, something we have been looking into is the ability to use the products to estimate buffer coverage at, for example, 10 years, if you have planted a seedling. You can usually see a surviving tree, but just because you can detect the tree does not mean that there is a growing forest buffer there; it is almost too high res. That's why, on the field and at the site scale, we are really looking to see it through a person's eyes. That said, there is a lot of potential as we gain AI capacity, and having access to this data is of tremendous value for being able to get a baywide sense of what we are gaining or losing. At 15 years, you are going to be closer to canopy closure, so it might give a more realistic sense of what has been reforested recently, but take it with a grain of salt.
        - **Alex Gunnerson:** Yea, I guess that is where we think about it in terms of a decision support resource, it is another piece of another tool in the toolbox to consider where to prioritize site visits and things like that.
    - **Rick Turcotte:** Fascinating presentation. Building off of what Anne said, a human looking at these things and getting a good enough image can make a decision. Is that what is going to happen? Is someone going to go through all these areas? Because AI takes around 10,000 examples to train, and that means people digitizing, training the machine, which is a huge resource burden. Is there going to be some sort of NDVI used? Success depends on what you can produce.
        - **Alex Gunnerson:** Yea, exactly. One of the publications we found done in New York state and Delaware County utilized image texture metrics, where they looked at image entropy and then the near infrared and red bands of the NAIP imagery. They were able to detect with about 98% accuracy the growth of planted report riparian forest buffers using digitized plantings over the course of 11 years for their particular sites. Granted this was only for the section of the watershed in their study. We would not want to train a full on convolutional neural network where we need 10,000 samples, it would be more of a machine learning approach where we segment the image based on pixel type at different time steps. We start training with field verified data provided by partners that let us know if there should be a buffer there, and then we train on stratified random samples across the watershed. We haven't spec'd out a work flow yet because we wanted to see if this would even make a difference to you all in reducing burden, and if any of you all would even be comfortable with it.
        - **Eric Hughes**: Thank you for that comment, Rick. Maybe a next step would be to collaborate with people like you and other experts to see if there is any interest there. I know that utilizing technology to streamline processes and improve processes is a priority of the current

administration and I know probably several of our federal partners, and based on some feedback we have gotten remote sensing verification is where there are potentially resources to help us. There are a lot of unknowns, but we wanted to come to the experts.

- **Katie Brownson:** I will jump in because I want to frame it a little bit more. I think the watershed model is very far from perfect, right? We make a lot of really big assumptions in the model about forests and how they are functioning, relying on LULC data and assumptions we make about the understory from the data and we know that it is not 100% accurate. So we should think whether on average this could be a good approach because the model is really working in averages more than precise accuracy for specific locations. Perhaps coupled with the more rigorous monitoring that is done under specific programs, it seems like there could be some potential in this approach on average for the watershed modeling purposes.
- **Robbie Coville:** I just want to throw in that, if you aren't already familiar with it, I would check out iTree Canopy which is a web based tool to do point sampling of aerial imagery. The challenge in using a tool like that for our buffer verification purposes would be imagery quality and having imagery at the right time stamps. It sounds like you are approaching solving some of these issues even without the machine learning component, which I think could be a promising thing to start.
- **Eric Oliver:** I just want to say we are using this in our forest work at the University of Kentucky to enhance our restoration projects. We are using satellite and commercially available imagery to start with and then we are working all the way down to our more multispectoral drone which we are able to get high resolution. We are developing a process to be able to pull out species types as well. So we are interested in collaborating with that kind of stuff because we are using the same techniques but have different targets.
- **Anne Hairston-Strang:** I'd be really interested in more about the species' work, because twe have not been able to get that reliably from remote sensing data. The other thing I wanted to say- one of the questions is 15-year contracts. For us, that would be CREP. You are going to need a stem count, so I don't think it would save time for renewal of a CREP contract because you have to look at invasives and stem counts, not just canopy cover. For other programs, to do the verified initial survival and presence or Bay Program verification, there could be a role there. But NRCS is going to need a little more detail for a CREP contract where they are getting paid.
- **Katherine Brownson:** I expect that there are some additional layers of complication with the federal programs, and getting data for the federal program as well. I think starting with non-federal programs would be better. What are you looking for in terms of BMP data?
- **Alex Gunnerson:** We are looking to create a prototype and pilot it with all the sentinel data that we have and the one meter LULC. So we would just like to find some pilot areas where we can prototype the workflow and begin to see if we can get anything accurate that people would be interested in. So if anyone is interested in sharing data and being part of the pilot prototype, that would be wonderful, please let us know.
- **Please reach out to Alex Gunnerson and Eric Hughes** if you have geospatial data for riparian forest buffer planting projects (for anything planted before 2021) that can be shared and used to pilot and test a potential approach.
    - Alex Gunnerson: agunnerson@chesapeakebay.net

- ■ Eric Hughes: hughes.eric@epa.gov

Lead: Alex Gunnerson (Koniag Government Services) and Eric Hughes (EPA) Requested Action: Non-decisional

IV. **Preparing Scenarios to Inform Planning Target Development**

- ○ Presentation discussion:
    - ■ **Katie Brownson**: This was meant to be a teaser as to what is to come, we are really going to have to dig into this work. I was not around when we did this the first time, so if people were around last time and this is jogging some memories of, for example, how we got the 6% number, that would be really informative. I would also encourage people to review that presentation, especially the slide with all the considerations and questions and things we are going to need to talk about so we can do a deeper dive at the next meeting or the one after. We are likely going to need to put together some joint conversations with the Ag Workgroup and Urban Stormwater Workgroups as well, because that is where our BMP's are getting implemented in these sectors.

Lead: Auston Smith (EPA)
Requested Action: Non-decisional

V. **Federal legislative and budget update**

- ● Update review:
    - ○ Many of the program and mission area cuts initially proposed at the beginning of the year were not adopted by Congress
    - ○ Saw $93 million for the Chesapeake Bay program, which is a $1 million increase. We also saw increased funding for Oyster Restoration through NOAA, and sustained funding for programs like Be Wet, Chesapeake Wild, and Chesapeake Gateways.
    - ○ The Farm Bill programs were addressed in the reconciliation bill. There was a cut to conservation technical assistance in the ag funding.
    - ○ The appropriations bill pulled unobligated funds from IIJA abandoned mineland restoration funds. PA received a lot of this funding previously which will now be used for wildland fires.
    - ○ Fiscal year 27 will start on time, so priorities will be submitted from mid February- mid March.
    - ○ Hill visits are happening February through March. Constituents are going into offices, the Bay Commission included, to talk to people about the funding, what it goes too, and why it is important.
    - ○ Federal legislation: A skinny farm bill could come out later this month. Congress is also looking at potential permit reform legislation that could impact the CWA and NEPA.
    - ○ State legislation: Budget amendments have been offered that would fully fund Virginia's cost share program for the 4th and 5th years in a row, which would include $4 million for Virginia trees and water quality grants to the VA DOF.
    - ○ In Maryland, DNR has a priority to expand the tree-mendous Maryland program and they are expecting a forest stewardship bill.

Lead: Anna Killius (Chesapeake Bay Commission)
Requested Action: Non-decisional

VI. **Review Input Received on 2026 Forestry Workgroup meetings**
- Discussion notes
  - **Matt Keefer**: Is this part of the bay program, or is this something we initiated ourselves? We might want to think about moving forward, a feedback meeting, at some point we might be questioned about our meeting frequency and things like that so this might be something to carry forward.
    - Katherine Brownson: This was mainly for us, we had heard feedback from a member that our meeting time did not work for them, so that was the original motivation. But you are right that there will be topics such as meeting frequency under scrutiny so having this positive input could be beneficial.
  - **Rob Schnabel**: Perhaps an update from the states on their current CREP acres to see trends are like forest buffer wise, and see if there is any life support we can bring to our CREP tree planting program. Maybe suggestions on how to improve them so that we get the conservation component, not just planting, but long term protection. Another idea is more of a modeling one: we are doing a bunch of work in Frederick County, and are in a push to modify the agricultural preservation program to meet a lot of the other county goals, and one of those is tree canopy goals. Some way to fold in our agriculture preservation or getting an idea of tree canopy on preserved lands, a lot of money is being spent on ag conservation and we want to maximize the benefits of this for communities. Some way to get an idea of existing programs out there that are really leveraging more forests.
  - **Frank Rodgers**: Interested in revisiting the discussion on how to increase diversity in planting stock. Nancy Sonti suggested we could bring in a relatively new USFS urban nursery specialist into that discussion.
  - **Katie Brownson**: We have also been thinking about, as we get into management strategy development, are there things we want to address that came out of the GIT tree supply project?

Lead: Katie Brownson (USFS)
Requested Action: Non-decisional

VII. **Discussion of New Forest Conservation Target**
- Discussion summary in response to presentation questions:
  - **Matt Keefer:** In PA, we don't have statewide regulations for land use, all the local municipalities develop their one ordinances. I think having this elevated in the agreement will help to bring some of those partners together, including state planning boards, and community and economic development organizations that have a say in how land use decisions are made. The stewardship question is a good one, if land owners develop legacy plans and deed restrictions, can some of that be leveraged to improve legacy planning for landowners? The role of conservancies is a big one.
  - **Rob Schnabel**: Having help with MS4's. A majority of MS4's in Maryland, given the bay programs guidance and the high credit system they get for doing in-stream projects, the jurisdictions are prioritizing doing in-stream work over true storm water management or forest planting or forest protection. Some people think in-steam projects shouldn't be getting any storm water credits, because the source of stream bank erosion is uncontrolled storm water, so it is kind of chasing its tail. Having Bay Programs help on that in reevaluating that because everyone

has put a majority of their MS4 credits to in-stream work and that is a lost opportunity.
  ○ **Lorenzo Cinalli**: It might be useful to engage with parks departments if you want to engage more forest conservation and stewardship. A lot of parks have forested lands that have dual purposes as conservation and recreation.

Lead: Katie Brownson (USFS)
Requested Action: Non-decisional

Next Meeting: March 4th, 2026, 9:00am - 11:00am

Attendees:

Julia Fucci (CRC)	Nancy Sonti (USFS)	Katherine Brownson (USFS)	Lorenzo Cinalli (DPR)	Alanna Crowley
Alexis Dickerson	Jenna Talbot (DNREC)	Anne Hairston-Strang (DNR)	Dexter Locke (MDFS)	Ned Brockmeyer
Alex Gunnerson	Auston Smith (EPA)	Jessie Rosenthal (DEC)	Ava Glasser	Craig Highfield
Chris Miller (DDA)	Rob Schnabel	Richard Turcotte (WVFS)	Lara Johnson (DOF)	Christopher Peters (FPAC/NRCS PA)
Emily Heller	Katie Ayers (EPA CBPO)	Eric Oliver (University of Kentucky)	Cassanda Davis (NYDEC)	Meghan Noe-Fellows (Delaware Center for the Inland Bays)
Dan Coy (MDFS)	Goldman Mulroy (DOF)	Frank (Capacon Inst. WV)	Brendan Durkin (DOEE)	Robbie Coville (PA DCNR)
Julie Mawhorter (PA FS)	Anna Killius (CBP)	Kristen Heberlig (CBF)	Samantha Cotten (DNREC)	Peter Claggett (USGS)
Teddi Stark (PADC)	Eric Hughes	Matthew Keefer	Michelle Katoski (USGS)	Robert Corletta (DDOT)