TREE CANOPY
WATER QUALITY GOAL TEAM- FORESTRY WORKGROUP

2014 WATERSHED AGREEMENT: GOAL & OUTCOME LANGUAGE

TREE CANOPY OUTCOME:

Continually increase urban tree canopy capacity to provide air quality, water quality and habitat benefits throughout the watershed. Expand urban tree canopy by 2,400 acres by 2025.

VITAL HABITATS GOAL:

Restore, enhance and protect a network of land and water habitats to support fish and wildlife, and to afford other public benefits, including water quality, recreational uses and scenic value across the watershed.

OUTCOME DISPOSITION ADVICE TO MANAGEMENT BOARD: UPDATE

VALUE OF THE OUTCOME

Recognizing the "stormwater control and water quality benefits of urban tree canopy cover," the Bay Program was an early leader in setting goals related to tree canopy, beginning with a 2003 Executive Council Directive. Bay Program partners and stakeholders across the watershed have for years cited the many co-benefits of urban and community trees beyond their importance to water quality, including air quality, urban heat mitigation, habitat values, carbon sequestration, economic vitality and an array of human health benefits. These features connect the Tree Canopy Outcome in direct and indirect ways to nearly all the Watershed Agreement goals and many outcomes within those goals. The benefits of trees are directly experienced in communities of all sizes across all corners of the watershed, making tree canopy a very relevant Bay Program goal for local engagement, stewardship, and public support. Voicing many of these reasons, the Forestry Workgroup expressed a strong consensus to continue and update the Tree Canopy Outcome, and similar support can be found in the public input from the Beyond 2025 process.

The Forestry Workgroup also emphasized the partnership value-add of continuing the Tree Canopy Outcome, noting the need for continued regional collaboration, developing and leveraging of resources, and technical assistance to the network of organizations that can help achieve tree canopy progress. Many partnership projects were achieved in the last 10 years, which would not have been possible without the driving focus of the Tree Canopy Outcome, workplans, and adaptive management process. Examples include the Chesapeake Tree Canopy Network and two regional Summits, County Tree Cover Status & Change Fact Sheets, schools guide, local government guide, Funding & Policy Roundtable, and the Urban Tree Supply Forum. With the challenges that lie ahead in meeting the Tree Canopy Outcome, the need for watershed-wide coordination, collaboration, and resource sharing has never been greater.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The 2014 Watershed Agreement built on earlier Bay Program tree canopy efforts by setting the first quantitative target to achieve a net gain of 2400 acres of additional tree canopy between 2014 and 2025. The focus on a net gain in tree canopy appropriately aims for the desired outcome on the ground, rather than a narrow focus just on planting. Achieving a canopy expansion goal requires conserving existing canopy as much as possible, planting at a rate that exceeds the many canopy losses that occur across the landscape, and maintaining the health of new and existing trees to sustain canopy into the future. Since the target was set, the jurisdictions and their wide network of local implementation partners have reported annually to the Bay Program on urban tree planting BMPs, collectively planting

nearly 11,340 acres in direct support of jurisdiction Watershed Implementation Plans.

Despite these gains, the overall trend across the watershed is that tree canopy losses far exceed planting rates within communities, with a net loss of over 25,800 acres between 2013/14 and 2017/18 (updated data coming soon). The Bay Program's investment in maintaining and updating high-resolution land cover/land use datasets at least every 4-5 years is critical for tracking progress and guiding implementation for this outcome, as well as many other outcomes in the Watershed Agreement. Tree canopy losses occur due to many factors, from natural mortality, pests/disease, and storms to land/property development and other removals. While some of these losses are unavoidable, others can be minimized through tree maintenance investments and conservation-focused planning and policy approaches. The 2023 Tree Canopy Funding & Policy Roundtable highlighted a number of promising approaches and drove home the need for continued strategic collaboration at the Bay Program to carry forward the recommendations and Jurisdiction Action Plans that were developed.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR UPDATING THE OUTCOME

The Tree Canopy Outcome was designed to be specific, measurable, and time-bound, and the acreage target was set based on what the Forestry Workgroup – including State Forestry agencies implementing longstanding Urban and Community Forestry programs – thought would be ambitious yet potentially realistic and achievable as a stretch target. The Forestry Workgroup expressed support for continuing a similar approach over the next 10 years, with new targets that are informed by the latest tree canopy progress data. The Forestry Workgroup is also considering minor edits to update the wording to reflect communities of all sizes, additional co-benefits, and the importance of conservation and stewardship.

Setting a new target:

The original 2400 acre target was based on each state setting an annual canopy expansion target and calculating those targets out to 2025. We may use a similar approach with this update, but we have the benefit of much more data on tree canopy change and planting rates to guide the setting of new watershed target. Despite the trend of net loss in many parts of the watershed, there is an interest in keeping the outcome positively focused on maintaining and expanding tree canopy.

Outcome wording:

The Tree Canopy Management Strategy uses a broad definition of "urban" to include communities of all sizes, and the Tree Canopy Indicator assesses net change in all census places, which includes communities across the urban-suburban-rural spectrum. In the outcome update, the Forestry Workgroup supports shifting the word "urban" to "community" to reflect this longstanding approach. The current outcome cites environmental benefits but could be improved through mention of the many benefits to people and communities. Given the overriding challenge of tree canopy loss, explicit mention of the critical importance of conservation and stewardship should be added.

Addressing conservation:

In addition to adding specific reference to conservation and stewardship in the outcome language, the Forestry Workgroup and stakeholder input highlights the need for the Bay Program to better address the need for forest conservation and stewardship beyond the urban/community footprint that is the focus of this outcome.

Links Cited:

Chesapeake Tree Canopy Network (2025):

https://chesapeaketrees.net/

County Tree Cover Status & Change Fact Sheets (2023):

https://chesapeaketrees.net/understand-your-canopy/

Trees and Schools: Growing the Connection (2021):

https://chesapeaketrees.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Trees-and-Schools-Resource-Guide-8-31-21-1.pdf

Local Government Guide to the Chesapeake Bay: Capitalizing on the Benefits of Trees (updated 2023)

https://chesapeaketrees.net/local-government-guide-capitalizing-tree-benefits/

Chesapeake Tree Canopy Funding & Policy Roundtable (2023):

https://arch.umd.edu/research-creative-practice/centers/environmental-finance-center/project-areas/technical-assistance/chesapeake-bay-watershed-tree-canopy-funding-and-policy-roundtable

Urban Tree Supply Forum: Addressing Regional Tree Supply Challenges and Opportunities (2024):

https://chesapeaketrees.net/2024/07/12/urban-tree-supply-forum/

Chesapeake Progress – Tree Canopy Outcome (2024):

https://www.chesapeakeprogress.com/abundant-life/tree-canopy