

Talking Points for 2023 Executive Council Meeting

Thank you for the opportunity to share our annual Stakeholders' Advisory Committee recommendations.

Since I spoke with this body last year, we have changed our name from Citizens to Stakeholders in an effort to be more inclusive. We continue to represent a diversity of stakeholders across the Chesapeake Watershed, including: watershed organizations, environmental funders, agricultural and business interests, retired government, educators, and environmental justice advocates.

As we celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the Chesapeake Bay Program and its successes, we also acknowledge what we've learned and what work still remains. This is a pivotal time as we near the 2025 TMDL deadline for practices in place to address water quality, while also:

- adapting to climate change,
- experiencing loss of critical habitat,
- addressing impacts of population growth, and
- continuing to reconcile historical racially exclusive practices to stewardship engagement and environmental injustice.

Despite these challenges we aim to offer the Partnership meaningful insights and opportunities that represent hope *and* can be translated into policy or concrete actions that strengthen the health of our ecosystem and foster quality of life for all watershed residents.

With that in mind, the Stakeholders' Committee offers you three issues of opportunity centered around:

- inclusive engagement,
- advancing action plans for wetlands and forests, and
- protecting existing high-quality habitats.

On inclusive engagement:

A number of years ago, the Stakeholders' Committee committed to intentionally diversifying its membership to be more representative of the demographics across the watershed. We continue to work internally on evolving Committee culture to be more inclusive and creating a place of belonging for all of our members. Last year we brought forth a recommendation that we believe would help by requesting funds for need-based volunteer stipends or honorariums for eligible members.

We have not given up on this need. And we are working with a small group of partners to create a pilot honorarium program. Just as this Council issued its statement in support of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice in 2020, we also believe empowering new voices and increasing diversity and inclusion for appointees and volunteer bodies is integral to equitable engagement.

Later in your business agenda, you will be discussing the creation of a new Agricultural Advisory Committee. The agricultural community is a key stakeholder in watershed restoration, so we support a thorough consideration of the charter and expectations of this potential new group. But we also encourage you to not abandon the idea of need-based honorariums in our effort to bring you authentic advice that includes the voices of community members not traditionally invited or able to come to the table.

Secondly, on advancing action plans for wetlands and forest buffers:

Last year, this Council charged your appointed Principal Staff to bring you recommendations for 'Charting a Course to 2025' which you are also about to discuss in your business meeting. You will hear again about some critically important *Watershed Agreement* outcomes that are lagging behind. The ones our Committee offers for your focused attention are: Forest Buffers and Wetlands.

We acknowledge that these are ambitious targets, and there are a number of variables- like financial and technical assistance constraints- but the good news is that we already have the plans. Last year your state agencies and federal representatives created specific state action plans for riparian forest buffers and recommendations to advance wetland restoration. We now have the best road maps we have ever had before.

We know we won't meet these targets before 2025, but before we start focusing only beyond that deadline and extending the timelines, we believe the public needs reassurance that this Council is committed to lead your agencies on implementing the practices that we know will help restore water quality. Let's get the momentum going now to help close the gaps as much as possible before 2025 and then it can carry us beyond the deadline.

Specifically, we recommend you charge your appointed principals to approve specific forest buffer and wetland plan actions within 6 months that:

- identify champions within your relevant agencies to outline the short and long-term funding needs;
- establish ambitious yet reasonable expectations of progress by 2025; and
- incorporate stakeholder feedback.

Lastly, on protecting existing high-quality habitats:

While restoration is important, it is also more expensive in the long-term and less efficient at reducing pollution than conserving and protecting the wetlands, mature forests, and urban and suburban tree canopy we already have.

We urge you to prioritize and incentivize the protection of existing mature forests and wetlands that are already serving us with co-benefits for:

mitigating climate change,
stormwater pollution, and
providing locally cherished places that engender stewardship and care for our environment.

And that includes resisting any potential state legislative attempts to roll back existing protections of wetlands in light of the recent Supreme Court case, *Sackett v EPA*.

We offer you two near-term opportunities that can help with this:

First, we strongly recommend the continued and sustained funding for the high-resolution land-use and land-change data and analysis, so both you and local governments can rely on complete assessments of existing, but more importantly- the trending *losses* of tree canopy and wetlands. This data will be crucial for land-use decision-making.

And secondly, we encourage you to work with the Chesapeake Watershed Congressional Delegation to ensure the next Farm Bill adequately supports Chesapeake Bay restoration and conservation Goals outlined in the *2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*. We

recommend you identify matching funds from your programs that can leverage potential Farm Bill conservation provisions.

In conclusion, we support you to take bold action to protect and restore the Chesapeake Bay Watershed for the benefit of our environment and the health and livelihood of the more than 18 million people who live here.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Stakeholders' Advisory Committee. That concludes my remarks.

We are happy to answer any questions you may have on any of the three reports.

Anticipated Questions:

The Sackett v EPA case:

Reviewed the scope of the Clean Water Act's authority to manage point source pollution discharge to only navigable waters. The findings were that EPA's regulatory jurisdiction only applies to wetlands with a continuous surface connection to waters of the U.S.

Estimated annual cost off Honorarium program:

We estimate about 25% of the Committee members are eligible for honorarium volunteer time to participate in quarterly meetings:

A rough estimate is about \$25,000/year. That would cover stipends for 7 members, each receiving \$3,600/year. (Breakdown: \$37.50/hour X 96 hours/year X 7 members)