



PUBLIC ACCESS GIT 5 / PUBLIC ACCESS WORKGROUP

2014 WATERSHED AGREEMENT: GOAL AND OUTCOME LANGUAGE

Public Access Site Development Outcome: “By 2025, add 300 new public access sites, with a strong emphasis on providing opportunities for boating, swimming and fishing, where feasible.”

Public Access Goal: “Expand public access to the Bay and its tributaries through existing and new local, state and federal parks, refuges, reserves, trails and partner sites.”

OUTCOME DISPOSITION ADVICE TO MANAGEMENT BOARD:

Update

Recommendation:

The Public Access Outcome should remain a distinct and essential component of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement. However, its scope should be expanded, and progress should be monitored using specific targets and metrics, emphasizing both water and land access sites. This approach will provide a more comprehensive strategy for developing public access within the watershed. Additional metrics to consider include ADA/ABA accessibility, the maintenance of existing sites, and net gain/loss targets. We also recommend conducting a baseline survey to track the progress of green spaces and establish future targets. It is crucial to ensure that new and existing access points are appropriately maintained.

Significance to Vision, Mission, and Goals: Public access to waterways as well as green space is essential to the Chesapeake Bay Program's vision of a resilient and healthy Bay supported by an engaged and informed public. It directly aligns with the Program's mission to enhance water quality, improve ecosystem health, and increase public awareness and stewardship. Engaging the community also stimulates local economies by promoting recreational activities and tourism in the region. The Public Access Outcome adds significant value by ensuring that all communities across the watershed have access to the Bay's waterways, natural resources, and landscapes. This access not only promotes physical and mental well-being but also creates opportunities for environmental education, fostering a greater public appreciation for the Bay and increasing support for broader conservation initiatives.

Value Added: Throughout the watershed, various jurisdictions, local governments, and federal agencies have programs and funding sources that enhance access to waterways and greenspaces. These initiatives are guided by several planning frameworks, such as master plans and State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans, which help identify and prioritize needs while guiding implementation. Although this work is ongoing, each entity faces challenges due to capacity limitations. By collaborating as partners under the regional Watershed Agreement, these programs can be strengthened, allowing partners to share best practices and successful strategies, and connect opportunities among programs. The Bay Program provides tools and data that offer scientific information for decision-making and tracking progress. These collaborative, cross-jurisdictional opportunities are essential for implementing solutions more effectively and efficiently in the long term.

SMART Updates and Incremental Timescale: The current Public Access Outcome meets the SMART criteria but needs to be updated to include specific metrics for water and land access, ADA/ABA accessibility, and a clear strategy for tracking the net gain or loss of access sites. A baseline survey of green spaces should be conducted to establish starting points and set realistic targets for future access sites in high need areas. The timeline for achieving this outcome is 10 to 15 years, with periodic milestone metrics to monitor progress in shorter increments. This approach allows for accurate data collection, adjustments to strategies, and more meaningful reporting on the success of the outcome.

Risks of Removal: Eliminating the Public Access Outcome would have significant negative effects on the health of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. It would reduce the productive pressure the Watershed Agreement commitments create in terms of accountability for increasing access, a likely consequence is reduction or elimination of already limited funding for access. Fewer access sites lead to reduced public engagement and participation in conservation and environmental education efforts, potentially leading to decreased advocacy and less community support for initiatives aimed at protecting the Bay. Furthermore, removing this outcome could harm tourism and recreational economic activities that depend on public access sites. This loss could also worsen inequalities in access, particularly for certain communities, depriving them of valuable opportunities for outdoor recreation, environmental education, and a connection to the natural world.

Challenges:

- **Funding:** Securing adequate funding for both the creation and long-term maintenance of public access sites remains a significant challenge. Many local governments and stakeholders have limited budgets for these initiatives, and without sufficient funding, new access sites may not be sustainable.
- **Local Capacity:** The capacity of local and state agencies to implement and manage public access projects can be a barrier, particularly in areas with limited staffing or expertise.

Opportunities:

- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Exploring innovative funding mechanisms such as public-private partnerships and green bonds can provide additional resources to support public access development.
- **Technological Tools:** The use of GIS mapping and other technologies can help identify high-priority areas for new public access sites and improve the efficiency of resource allocation.
- **Improvement of Existing Sites:** In addition to developing new sites, there is an opportunity to improve the accessibility and programming at existing access sites, ensuring they are fully utilized and provide maximum benefit to the public.
- **Educational Outreach:** Expanding educational efforts and engaging communities in the stewardship of these sites can help generate long-term support for public access initiatives, building a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility for the Bay's health.

In conclusion, the Public Access Outcome should remain a distinct and integral part of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement. There is tremendous demand for access to both waterways and greenspace, demand exceeding what is available. Expanding the scope and tracking its progress with specific targets and metrics will strengthen its impact. As part of Beyond 2025, GIT 5 has conducted a series of public office hours and an online survey to collect feedback from stakeholders at federal, state, and local levels. Feedback from 35 stakeholders has been incorporated in this recommendation.