



July 1, 2025

Governor Wes Moore  
Chair, Chesapeake Executive Council  
State of Maryland  
100 State Circle  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401-1925

Dear Governor Moore,

Governments from across the Chesapeake Bay region are now updating the major plan for how partners will come together to protect this national treasure. The draft Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement (Agreement) has been released for public feedback. The Board of Directors of the Indigenous Conservation Council is calling on all Signatories to finally honor tribal sovereignty and Indigenous Knowledge as essential to rise to the occasion and protect one of the largest estuaries on the planet by formally including us as Signatory partners and respecting Indigenous Knowledge as central to the process.

For thousands of years, our Tribal Nations have been nurturing healthy wetlands, forests, and savannahs and rivers and, indeed, the Chesapeake Bay. Our treaties developed in the 1600s recognized the vital connections and relationships our Sovereign Nations had as long-standing Guardians of land, water, and all relations. This relationship, despite many attempts to erase and forcibly remove Indigenous Peoples from our homelands, has never been broken. The Chesapeake Bay region was recently approved by Mission Blue as one of 167 Hope Spots around the world precisely because of this opportunity to fully honor tribal sovereignty and Indigenous Knowledge in the Chesapeake Bay restoration movement moving forward. We ask

for your leadership to insist the updated Agreement enshrine and reflect our Guardian relationship so important to the Bay's health.

Background:

The Chesapeake Bay region includes one of the world's largest and most studied estuaries and is the ancestral homelands of many Tribal Nations including recently federally recognized tribes. The Chickahominy Indian Tribe, Chickahominy Indian Tribe - Eastern Division, Monacan Indian Nation, Nansemond Indian Nation, Pamunkey Indian Tribe, Rappahannock Tribe and Upper Mattaponi Indian Tribe are all now recognized by federal law as legal and political Sovereign Nations. In 2022, our tribal leadership supported the formation of the Indigenous Conservation Council, an intertribal consortium, to build the capacity of all Tribal Nations in the Chesapeake Bay watershed to protect our ancestral lands and water. We are rising to meet the challenges that face our homelands and in January 2025 unanimously passed a resolution, *A Declaration of Tribal Nations as Sovereign Governments Committed to the Protection and Restoration of Ancestral Lands and Waters through the Chesapeake Bay Program Partnership*, signed by all the Chiefs of the federally recognized tribes. The declaration called for:

- 1) Tribal Nations to have a seat at the table in the Partnership with signatory status for the Indigenous Conservation Council, an intertribal consortium established by the seven federally recognized tribes in Virginia to build regional tribal capacity to protect ancestral lands and waters;
- 2) The opportunity to establish and fund an Indigenous Guardians program in the region to boost collaboration, tribal capacity, and co-management outcomes; and,
- 3) To finally honor and respect Indigenous Knowledge as central to the Bay's recovery.

For decades, the Chesapeake Bay Program Partnership has brought together governments, which now include the State of New York, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the State of Maryland, the State of West Virginia, the State of Delaware and the Commonwealth of Virginia, the District of Columbia, the US Federal Government, and the Chesapeake Bay Commission to collaborate as signatories to the Agreement to protect this ecosystem and national treasure.

However, the Partnership has never formally included any Tribal Nations as signatories and equal partners at the decision making table.

Our Petition:

Now we are insisting that this list of Sovereign Governments also include Tribal Nations with signatory status to the revised Agreement. The response to our declaration from the Principal Staff Committee approved at its June 27, 2024 meeting states that to include a new signatory of the Indigenous Conservation Council on the Agreement will require a new Executive Council charge. We disagree that any additional charge is necessary or needed given on ongoing consultation with the US government to state our interest in formally engaging in the Partnership, your expressed desired to update this Agreement to reflect governance and structure to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency and inclusiveness of the Chesapeake Bay Program, and in recognition of our unique political and legal status under US law as Sovereign Nations recognized in the draft Agreement. We insist that the Executive Council take action at its December meeting to fully support our declaration and honor tribal sovereignty, self-determination, and Indigenous Knowledge.

Already, with the help of many partners and organizations, the draft Agreement has embraced some of the language included in our declaration as a good start. Specifically, the draft Agreement pledges to **“integrate Tribal Nations into the partnership in a manner that appropriately considers their unique status as Independent Sovereign Nations.”** We call on all Signatories to create room at the table for this new Signatory status for the Indigenous Conservation Council that can honor Tribal Nations as critical partners in the Bay’s recovery and healing. **We do not ask for anything less or the exploration of different avenues than what we expressed in our declaration: Signatory status, jurisdictional funding, and full respect for our values and Indigenous Knowledge needed to realize our mutual shared goals.**

The draft Agreement also promises to use science-based decision-making but only **“consider”** Indigenous Knowledge. Numerous studies have proven how effective Indigenous Knowledge is in increasing and even accelerating biodiversity and community well-being outcomes identified in the draft Agreement. The truth is, the Bay **needs** Indigenous Knowledge to succeed and meet the challenges mounting in the region—from chronic habitat loss to Forever Chemicals now

making some fish too toxic to eat. **The Agreement must make a stronger commitment to honor and respect Indigenous Knowledge on the same level as western science.**

Every drop of water that falls on land and makes its way to the Bay reminds us that a healthy Bay starts with reverence for land and water. **And we know that when Indigenous People are connected and able to fully care for their ancestral lands, biodiversity bounces back.** With ongoing losses of wetlands, forests, and farms, we need to ensure that the draft Agreement continues to prioritize bold land protection goals.


The Partnership proved successful in achieving the last 2 million acre target set in the 2014 Agreement over a 10 year period. **We call on Chesapeake Bay Program Signatories to continue this momentum in setting the next 15 year conservation and restoration targets at a similar rate, especially by supporting meaningful increases in land protected by and managed in partnership with tribal communities.** We are now co-developing a new tribal lands metric with the ICC that is referenced in the draft Agreement that will continue to restore full connections to ancestral lands for ecosystem health and community well-being that all Signatories seek.


Finally, **we call on the Bay Program to fully integrate the lessons learned from tribal-federal-state partnerships across the country that are already in place.** So many Partnerships have already proven why it is beneficial to honor tribal sovereignty at the decision-making table, continue to emphasize the importance of government-to-government consultation, are funding the capacity building of Tribal Nations as Guardians of their homelands that have enhanced co-management and outcomes, and are ensuring that Indigenous Knowledge is respected on equal footing to western science. In partnership with the Chesapeake Legal Alliance, we look forward to submitting a review of these partnership best practices with recommendations for the Chesapeake Bay Program to replicate via a recently accepted abstract to the *Sea Grant Law & Policy Journal*. These foundational elements of governance and structure are behind some of the greatest successes of our generation and must be brought to bear in the Chesapeake. We are behind the curve but we can catch up.


We look forward to standing shoulder to shoulder with other Sovereign Governments and legally and politically recognized consortium partners as Signatories and valued leaders in the efforts to come.


We present this petition signed by many supporters as a testament to the opportunity for the revised Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement to fully respect and honor tribal sovereignty and Indigenous Knowledge. It is time for Tribal Nations to be recognized as formal and enduring partners in the protection and restoration of our homelands in the Chesapeake Bay Program.


Sincerely,


Signed by:  
  
36A4046797CC498...  
Chief Anne Richardson, Rappahannock Tribe  
(Chair)

Signed by:  
  
6A1D071D640D46B...  
Chief Frank Adams, Upper Mattaponi Indian  
Tribe (Vice-Chair)

DocuSigned by:  
  
7918C1363E154C0...  
Second Assistant Chief Reggie Stewart,  
Chickahominy Indian Tribe (Treasurer)

Signed by:  
  
0B3D7B01D4984D6...  
Tribal Councilwoman Barbara Orf,  
Nansemond Indian Nation (Secretary)

Signed by:  
  
43A6085FD18D4BC...  
Chief Kevin Brown, Pamunkey Indian Tribe

Signed by:  
  
A7262768123A47B...  
Chief Joanne Howard, Chickahominy Indian  
Tribe-Eastern Division

Signed by:  
  
653D2789D3AF4C2...  
Chief Diane Shields, Monacan Indian Nation

Cc: Chesapeake Executive Council Members: Mayor Muriel Bowser (District of Columbia), Governor Kathy Hochul (State of New York), Sen. Sarah Love (Chesapeake Bay Commission), Governor Matt Meyer (State of Delaware), Governor Patrick James Morrissey (State of West Virginia), Governor Josh Shapiro (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania), Governor Glenn Youngkin (Commonwealth of Virginia), Secretary Lee Zeldin (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency)