



January XX, 2026

Mr. William Fink
Chair, Chesapeake Bay Program's Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC)
1301 Fulling Mill Road
Middletown, PA 17057

Re: Principals' Staff Committee Response to the ACC Recommendations

Dear Chairperson Fink,

On behalf of the Chesapeake Bay Program's (CBP) Chesapeake Executive Council (EC) and as Chair of the Principals' Staff Committee (PSC), I want to thank you and the ACC for your thoughtful recommendations (letter dated November 10, 2025). The PSC very much appreciates the opportunity to respond to your letter and stands ready to assist the AAC in fulfilling its annual priorities. In addition, I would like to express my gratitude for the advice offered during the private EC session at their December 2, 2025, annual meeting, and the AAC's active engagement during recent Management Board and PSC meetings.

Please find as follows the PSC's responses to each of your recommendations.

AAC Recommendation 1: Strengthen Farm Viability as the Foundation for Conservation

Economic viability is inseparable from environmental sustainability. When farms thrive, conservation thrives. Programs should explicitly link profitability, cash flow, and risk management with conservation outcomes.

- *Support state-level cost-share and tax-credit programs that align conservation with financial health.*
- *Encourage business-planning and transition services alongside conservation funding to help the next generation enter and remain in farming.*
- *Recognize that voluntary adoption of BMPs depends on farms having the resources to act.*

PSC Response to Recommendation 1:

The Chesapeake Bay Program partnership's vision has long included both environmental and economic sustainability, recognizing that the two are not mutually exclusive. This was reinforced in the revised Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement approved by the EC last year. The PSC agrees that farm viability must be supported and appreciates the suggestions made by the AAC in this recommendation to do so.

Partnership discussions about conservation programs have historically focused on the environmental benefit and value of Best Management Practice (BMP) implementation rather than the return on investment associated with those practices. Nutrient and sediment reductions associated with BMPs will remain a primary focus of the partnership, but in developing programs and prioritizing BMPs, benefits to farms and farmers must also be considered. The partnership has benefitted from excellent contributions from members of the agricultural community and will further benefit from the expertise provided by the AAC. The PSC asks that the AAC collaborate with other CBP implementation entities to share how the partnership can most effectively align conservation actions with farm viability, potentially culminating in a future presentation to the PSC or a CBP symposium. We welcome detailed, implementable, and signatory-specific legislative and policy proposals that the EC and PSC can consider to meet this shared goal.

AAC Recommendation 2: Accelerate Innovation and Target Investments

Investments in agricultural conservation are working. To build on this success, the Partnership should continue to support innovative practices, strategies, and technologies that enhance productivity, profitability, and water quality.

- *Prioritize soil health, precision agriculture, efficient nutrient management, and manure treatment technologies.*
- *Strengthen public-private partnerships for data collection and innovation, with appropriate liability and privacy protections.*
- *Support innovative incentive approaches.*
- *Ensure that state and federal programs are responsive and flexible to keep pace with new technologies and advancements.*

PSC Response to Recommendation 2:

The PSC agrees that the partnership should support innovative efforts to achieve its goals, with an emphasis placed on maximizing efficiency. Each of the ideas listed under this recommendation have recently been mentioned as interests of the partnership.

Soil health was considered for inclusion as an Outcome in the revised Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement. The partnership ultimately decided against establishing a specific Soil Health Outcome; however, several partners shared that ongoing efforts to establish healthy soils across the watershed will continue to advance and expand in the absence of a dedicated Soil Health Outcome. The PSC encourages the AAC to collaborate with the Clean Water Goal Team and relevant workgroups, including the Agriculture Workgroup, to enhance the partnership's understanding of soil health and actions that can be taken to promote it.

Public-private partnerships will be essential to reaching our Bay restoration goals beyond 2025. They offer opportunities to leverage unique sources of funding to implement conservation projects. They also provide a means by which the partnership can improve its representation of agriculture in its modeling tools. The PSC believes that the CBP suite of modeling tools should incorporate multiple lines of evidence to improve its accuracy. To that end, the PSC asks the AAC to connect the partnership with key members of the agricultural community who may be able and willing to provide sources of previously untapped data to be included, as the AAC notes, with appropriate liability and privacy protections in place.

AAC Recommendation 3: Celebrate Agricultural Progress and Build Public Trust

What we call the “agricultural sector” is made up of 83,000 farms, including many small private landowners who have achieved measurable reductions in nutrient and sediment losses through their collective voluntary actions, innovation, and stewardship. Those successes deserve to be recognized.

- *Establish a proactive communications campaign across the Partnership to highlight on-farm conservation results.*
- *Use transparent, credible data to tell the story of progress – highlighting wins while identifying opportunities for continued improvement.*

The Chesapeake Bay states are national leaders in BMP adoption; it’s time to communicate that progress more effectively to policymakers and the public.

PSC Response to Recommendation 3:

Highlighting progress made toward achieving nutrient and sediment reduction goals, especially in the agricultural sector, is essential to galvanizing support for Bay restoration efforts beyond 2025. The PSC agrees that the jurisdictions in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed are leaders in conservation and are home to many producers with a strong stewardship ethic. Attention should be given to these success stories.

Partnership implementation bodies can and should routinely spotlight successful conservation projects and strategies to reward and grow these valuable efforts. A successful approach taken in one part of the watershed may be implemented elsewhere as a result of this cross-partner communication, accelerating our progress toward our collective goals. The PSC asks the AAC to share examples of “wins” in the agricultural sector to be communicated across the partnership.

AAC Recommendation 4: Support Land Preservation and Diverse Agricultural Systems

Preserving farmland is integral to protecting the Bay. Development is the true alternative to agriculture, and maintaining working lands should remain a central strategy.

- *Support farmland as a preferred land use through ag land preservation programs and other options for working lands.*
- *Ensure that conservation programs are adaptable for diverse operations – including urban, small-scale, and food-access-focused farms.*
- *Maintain flexibility in program design to avoid constraining agriculture’s ability to remain diverse and nimble in food production.*

PSC Response to Recommendation 4:

The PSC agrees that farmland preservation should be a priority of the partnership. Protecting productive agricultural land supports a future food supply and the diversity of the regional economy and can contribute to healthy landscapes. The Chesapeake Bay watershed jurisdictions all have robust agricultural conservation easement purchasing programs and consistently rank among the leaders in farmland preservation nationwide. The partnership can leverage the local interest in preserving agricultural spaces to make progress toward achieving its Healthy Landscapes goal.

The Protected Lands Outcome in the revised Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement is relevant to recommendation. This Outcome prescribes the permanent protection of “an additional 2 million acres of land above the 2025 baseline of 9.3 million acres”; to achieve this, targets will be set for preserving specific land uses, including agricultural lands. Additionally, by June of 2027, the Management Strategy for this outcome will be developed. Management Strategies will detail the means for achieving each outcome and associated targets. Targets will be refined under the Protected Lands Outcome for working lands protection that also incorporate BMPs including edge-of-field practices (e.g., buffers) as well as in-field practices (e.g., cover crops). The PSC encourages the AAC to engage with the Healthy Landscapes Goal Team and relevant workgroups on the topic of farmland preservation, sharing these recommendations with those groups to inform Management Strategy and target development.

AAC Recommendation 5: Cultivate Agricultural Literacy and Workforce Development

To sustain momentum, the next generation must be engaged and equipped.

- *Promote agricultural literacy in schools and community programs.*
- *Invest in workforce and leadership pipelines for farmers, agronomists, animal scientists, and conservation professionals.*
- *Encourage mentorship programs and recognition of young farmer leadership in conservation.*



Economic viability and workforce development are directly linked – young producers and conservationists must see a viable future in agriculture if we expect continued progress.

PSC Response to Recommendation 5:

It is widely recognized that, nationwide, our producer population is shrinking. The number of farmers over the age of 65 is increasing while the number of farmers aged 35-64 is declining. The most recent USDA Census of Agriculture reported a small increase in the number of farmers under the age of 35; however, this trend is not sustainable. Food production is vital to all in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. So too are those who produce it.

There are three Outcomes in the revised Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement that are relevant to this recommendation: School District Environmental Literacy Planning; Student Environmental Literacy Experiences; and Workforce. The PSC believes that the AAC's recommendation includes several strong ideas for cultivating a viable agricultural workforce for generations to come. The PSC encourages the AAC to share these recommendations with the Engaged Communities Goal Team and relevant workgroups to inform Management Strategy development.

Thank you for your dedication to restoring the Chesapeake Bay and your ongoing participation as we implement the revised Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement now and into the future. Your and the AAC's continued contributions make our partnership stronger and more successful.

Sincerely,

Jessica Shirley
Chair, Principals' Staff Committee
Secretary, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection