



## PROTECTED LANDS

## GIT 5 / PROTECTED LANDS WORKGROUP

## 2014 WATERSHED AGREEMENT: GOAL AND OUTCOME LANGUAGE

**Land Conservation Outcome:** “By 2025, protect an additional two million acres of lands throughout the watershed—currently identified as high-conservation priorities at the federal, state or local level—including 225,000 acres of wetlands and 695,000 acres of forest land of highest value for maintaining water quality”

**Land Conservation Goal:** “Conserve treasured landscapes in order to maintain water quality and habitat; sustain working forests, farms and maritime communities; and conserve lands of cultural, indigenous and community value.”

## OUTCOME DISPOSITION ADVICE TO MANAGEMENT BOARD:

## Update

**Recommendation:**

The Protected Lands Outcome should be maintained as a distinct and critical component of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement, while updating its language to encompass protection as well as regional, strategic large landscape conservation efforts. This Outcome’s outputs should include specific target metrics addressing various types of areas, such as forests, agricultural landscapes, wetlands, watersheds, urban green spaces, and tribal lands. By broadening the scope, we can better align the outcome with the Bay Program’s mission of enhancing ecosystem health, water quality, and Bay resiliency. This approach will also provide a more comprehensive framework to track progress across conservation efforts, helping to focus resources on high-priority areas and create stacked benefits across multiple program outcomes.

**Significance to Vision, Mission, and Goals:** Protecting land is essential to the Chesapeake Bay Program’s wider conservation and restoration efforts. It plays a vital role in improving water quality and restoring the health of the Bay and its tributaries. This approach offers long-term ecological benefits, as well as economic and social advantages. These include supporting local communities by enhancing recreation, improving quality of life, boosting tourism, and increasing agricultural productivity. Additionally, it promotes public health by providing accessible green spaces for recreation and well-being, while also addressing community resilience challenges. The Executive Council has indicated that elevating conservation alongside restoration is a key direction, and this was a strong recommendation from Phase 1 of Beyond 2025.

**SMART Updates and Incremental Timescale:** The current outcome meets the SMART criteria but should be updated to encompass a wider range of conservation areas. Metrics for this initiative will be established with the assistance of the Indigenous Conservation Council on behalf of the seven federally recognized tribes in the watershed, the Chesapeake Conservation Partnership, and other interested partners working in land conservation. The timeline for achieving this outcome is expected to be 10 to 15 years, with incremental milestones to measure success and adapt to emerging challenges. This strategy enables a continuous, adaptive process that can respond to changes in local capacity, funding, and environmental conditions while maintaining a long-term focus on the ecological health of the Bay.

**Value Added as part of the CBP Partnership:** A substantial network of practitioners is dedicated to protecting and conserving land throughout the watershed. This network includes land trusts and various government agencies. The Bay Program partnership uniquely facilitates the establishment of shared goals and objectives among partners on a regional level. This collaboration is backed by the authority and accountability that arise from the strong commitments made by the signatories of the Agreement, particularly the jurisdictions involved.

**Risks of Removal:** The removal of the Outcome could lead to noteworthy challenges for the health of the Bay and its surrounding ecosystems. It is vital to conserve land and maintain forests, wetlands, and other areas to ensure water quality is protected. Without a continued emphasis on preventing nonpoint source pollution and conserving intact habitats, the progress made in restoration efforts may struggle to counteract the degradation resulting from land conversion. Additionally, the loss of natural buffers could increase the watershed's susceptibility to pollution, flooding, and other impacts. It's important to recognize that maintaining this outcome is likely to foster public support for conservation initiatives, as the protection and conservation of open spaces enjoy broad, bipartisan support from local communities, state and federal agencies, and private organizations. Moreover, the absence of this outcome could pose challenges in securing funding for land conservation projects, which is essential for achieving long-term conservation objectives.

**Challenges:**

- **Staffing and Resources:** Achieving land conservation requires adequate staffing and resources at federal, state, and local levels. Actions and targets should align with jurisdiction priorities. A lack of capacity or funding can hinder progress and delay conservation efforts.
- **Competition for Land:** There is growing competition for land due to urbanization, infrastructure development (e.g., solar panel installations, data centers), and other land-use changes that threaten or compete with conservation priorities.

**Opportunities:**

- **Increased Public Support:** There is growing public awareness of the value of natural places and accessible open spaces, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. This offers an opportunity to engage the public more deeply in land conservation efforts and highlight the importance of protecting land for both ecological health and human well-being.
- **Innovative Funding Models:** Opportunities exist to explore new funding sources, such as public-private partnerships, green bonds, conservation easements, and mitigation dollars, to support land conservation efforts.
- **Technological Tools:** The use of technology such as GIS mapping can help identify high-priority areas for conservation and improve resource allocation, ensuring that efforts are focused on the most impactful locations.

In conclusion, the Protected Lands Outcome remains a critical component of the Chesapeake Bay Program. By updating the outcome to encompass large landscape conservation, we can more effectively track progress, prioritize conservation efforts, and ensure that the Bay's ecological health is preserved for future generations. 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 170 stakeholders has been incorporated in this recommendation.