

HEALTHY WATERSHEDS
HEALTHY WATERSHEDS GIT

2014 WATERSHED AGREEMENT: GOAL & OUTCOME LANGUAGE

HEALTHY WATERSHEDS OUTCOME:

100 percent of state-identified currently healthy waters and watersheds remain healthy.

HEALTHY WATERSHEDS GOAL:

Sustain state-identified healthy waters and watersheds recognized for their high quality and/or high ecological value.

OUTCOME DISPOSITION ADVICE TO MANAGEMENT BOARD:

UPDATE

Concerns with current outcome:

The current outcome is questionably measurable and not timebound. It lacks partner commitment, resources, and monitoring of the conditions used to justify the original “healthy watershed” designation. Variability in each state’s definition of “healthy watersheds” prevents consistent and comparable assessments of both conditions and progress. Confusion exists over the relationship between watershed health and stream health: a watershed with streams impaired for acid mine drainage or toxics may be completely forested and therefore deemed “healthy” while some developed watersheds support cold water fisheries and other indicators of “health”.

Why this outcome is still needed:

Preventing pollution by maintaining landscape integrity complements restoration and should be part of a holistic watershed approach. Given expected changes in land use and climate, maintaining forests and wetlands in areas supporting high-quality streams is essential to protect water quality. Without emphasis on preventing nonpoint source pollution and conserving intact habitats through protection, restoration will need to keep pace with degradation caused by land conversion with the risk of prolonging the recovery of the Bay for additional decades. Maintaining forests and wetlands in watersheds with restoration investments is also needed to protect those investments as well as adjacent lands, e.g., downzoning or preserving lands upstream of natural stream channel restoration project sites. Watershed protection is a national priority in the US EPA’s 2024 Nonpoint Source program guidance issued to States and is an essential component of source-water protection strategies.

Land conservation, land use policies and planning, and regulatory programs (§319 and §303(c) of the Clean Water Act) are the main means employed to maintain natural watershed conditions. The need to leverage these strategies to protect the Chesapeake Bay has been stressed in every Agreement since the creation of the Chesapeake Bay Program in 1983 and is aligned with the original purpose of the Bay Program to have a functional ecosystem in the Chesapeake Bay. Most recently, the Beyond 2025 Healthy Watersheds recommendations and Executive Council charge highlight the need for increased emphasis on land conservation, stewardship, and watershed health. The Healthy Watersheds Outcome is the only outcome that integrates these strategies into a holistic approach towards protecting all waters including both tidal and non-tidal waters. A high-level recognition of the importance of watershed health in a “watershed agreement” is essential. Protection and planning are also cost-effective solutions, usually much cheaper than restoration. The public benefits from intact watershed lands and realizes many ecosystem services from those lands for free. If intact high-value lands are not permanently protected, they may be degraded, and those public benefits lost. Protecting water quality is the most frequent reason the public supports open space conservation. This relationship is explicit in

the Healthy Watersheds Outcome.

Value added contribution of the CBP Partnership:

The CBP Partnership considers the entire watershed and works across jurisdictional boundaries which is particularly important for planning for and gauging watershed health. Land use and land conservation decisions are mostly made at local levels by counties, municipalities, land trusts, and private landowners. These groups, however, often lack incentives and capacity to make strategic decisions. The CBP Partners have the science, data, and tools to inform strategic land conservation and planning decisions. They also can establish policies, programs, and funding sources to incentivize local actions. The CBP Partnership, however, cannot effectively inform local decisions without support for strategic engagement with those working at local scales. Building local capacity for watershed protection and planning has been shown to work, resulting in thousands of protected acres and stream miles, and is an important need that is not currently funded. Incorporation of watershed protection into local planning decisions is a potentially significant new strategy to maintain landscape integrity and watershed health. Local planning decisions rarely incorporate watershed protection. Incorporating watershed-based plans with protection and restoration into local planning is a need and currently receives insufficient funding.

Recommendations:

- To better align watershed health with stream health, update the outcome as: **“Maintain watershed processes and landscape conditions contributing to ecosystem services and healthy aquatic ecosystems. Support the conservation, restoration, and management of natural and working lands such as floodplains, riparian areas, and timberlands.”**
- To ensure that the Healthy Watersheds Goal is consistent and supportive of the new outcome, recommend to the Principals Staff Committee to update the goal as: **“Protect and sustain waters and watersheds with high ecological value.”**
- Update the topic as “Watershed Health” in place of “Healthy Watersheds”.
- Establish both short-term (5-year) and long-term (20-year) targets for building local capacity and for protecting, maintaining and improving watershed health.
- Include strategic conservation within healthy watersheds as one of several strategies to achieve related outcomes pertaining to Sustainable Fisheries, Water Quality, Vital Habitats, Land Conservation, Public Access, and Stewardship.
- Align watershed and stream health metrics to achieve consistent messaging and decision support.
- Incorporate the Beyond 2025 Healthy Watersheds Small Group recommendations into the management strategies for an updated Watershed Health Outcome and other relevant outcomes.
- Consider moving this outcome under a new Conservation GIT that would also include outcomes and workgroups related to protected lands, watershed planning, stream health, tree canopy, riparian buffers, wetlands, and possibly local leadership.