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: **RECLASSIFY**

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 elements of this outcome is still needed:

Protecting water quality is the most frequent reason the public supports open space conservation. Preventing water pollution by maintaining landscape integrity complements restoration and is an essential part of a holistic approach to watershed management. 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. However, these diverse strategies confound the development of a community of practice around the concept of watershed health. For this reason, the intent of the Healthy Watersheds outcome might be better achieved by integrating elements from it into other outcomes.

Value added contribution of the CBP Partnership:

The CBP Partnership considers the entire 64,000 mi^2 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:

- Update the Agreement topic as **"Watershed Health"** in place of "Healthy Watersheds".
- Update the Healthy Watersheds Goal as the **Watershed Health Goal**: ***Protect and sustain waters and watersheds to achieve and maintain high ecological value.***
- Reclassify the Healthy Watersheds Outcome as outputs supporting the Stream Health, Protected Lands, and Land Use Decision Support outcomes.
- Work with the Stream Health Workgroup to align watershed and stream health metrics to achieve consistent messaging and decision support.
- Work with the Protected Lands Workgroup to promote strategic conservation to protect healthy watersheds, healthy forests, and valued habitats and landscapes.
- Work with the Land Use Workgroup to implement the proposed Land Use Decision Support outcome.

Note: The HWGIT does not recommend combining Watershed Health and Stream Health. Stream Health is focused on restoring degraded non-tidal stream habitat and water quality to achieve ecological uplift. Watershed Health is focused on preventative measures, planning and land protection, to maintain the health of streams and estuaries. Each has a different and unique community of practice.