OUTLOOK OFF COURSE

# Forest Buffers

**Outcome**

Continually increase the capacity of forest buffers to provide water quality and habitat benefits throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Restore 900 miles of riparian forest buffers per year and conserve existing buffers until at least 70 percent of riparian areas in the watershed are forested.

**Status**

The pace and scale of forest buffer implementation across the watershed is inadequate to meet the ambitious goals set in the 2014 *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement* or in the Watershed Implementation Plans (WIPs) put in place by the seven jurisdictions. The Chesapeake Bay Program has not met its goal for riparian forest buffers since 2002, often achieving less than 10% on an annual basis. To meet the goals laid out in the Phase III WIPs, over 3,000 miles of forest buffers would need to be planted between 2022 and 2025. The Forest Buffers Outcome is off course and will not be met by 2025.

**What has helped achieve success since 2014?**

- Increased implementation of flexible buffer programs that have been popular with landowners. Effective components of these programs include funding buffers on a rolling basis and limiting or eliminating out-of-pocket costs for landowners.
- Development of state Riparian Forest Buffer Action Strategies to help identify pathways to accelerate implementation over the next 5-10 years.
- Additional state and federal funding available for tree planting initiatives, including through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act.
- Ongoing work to fill information gaps, including the Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee Rising Water Temperatures report and the Maintaining Forests in Stream Restoration project.

**What challenges have hindered progress?**

- Insufficient capacity for technical assistance, planting, and maintenance. Much more technical assistance is needed to find, recruit, and assist landowners.
- A need for additional consistent, coordinated leadership across the watershed to ensure efficient, dedicated, and sustainable programs are in place.
- Inconsistencies in funding and program delivery, particularly in relation to CREP.
- Conserving mature forest buffers. Additional buffer conservation easement programs are needed to incentivize permanent conservation of forest buffers.

**If on course, what is needed to continue current trajectory? If off course, what is needed to accelerate progress? If uncertain, what would need to be done before 2025 to classify as on course/off course and can this be done in that timeframe?**

- Support sustained investments in effective, standalone flexible buffer programs (both existing and new programs).
- Build and retain capacity in staff, contractors, and outreach. This should include coordinating around regional training needs, identifying additional long-term sources of funding for technical assistance, modifying grant and funding provisions to better support capacity building, for example, by enabling longer-term grant periods.
- Track and maintain accountability for implementing the recently developed state Riparian Forest Buffer Action Strategies. The Management Board agreed to start reporting out on

strategy implementation at one of their July 2023 meetings, but continued follow-up will be needed.

- Improved verification of buffers. Every year buffers are lost in the model due to lack of verification and more cost-effective approaches to verification are needed.