

Pennsylvania's Riparian Forest Buffer (RFB) Action Strategy 2022

Pennsylvania's RFB Outcomes by 2025:

83,000 acres of RFBs on agricultural lands

- Goal set jointly by Chesapeake Bay Program Ag Workgroup and Forestry Workgroup

2,650 acres of RFBs in developed areas

- Goal set jointly by Bay Stormwater Workgroup and Forestry Workgroup

7,255 acres of RFBs in Conowingo WIP

Goal based on 25 percent of the remaining unbuffered acres after goals in Phase III WIP met.

TOTAL Pennsylvania RFB GOAL: 92,905 acres

Current rate of implementation needs to increase from ~1,500 acres/year to ~23,000 acres/year

Current Status and Context in PA:

Pennsylvania's recent approach to RFBs includes collaboratively working with stakeholders and partners to deliver options and tools that motivate, enable, and assist landowners and farmers with planting and maintaining buffers with support from local technical assistance providers.

Pennsylvania has strived to provide funding and programs that work for both landowners and practitioners based on direct feedback and conversations with both stakeholders and landowners. The current suite of options of buffer programs in Pennsylvania includes USDA cost-share programs, DCNR grants awards to partners containing funding from both state and federal sources, emerging and developing flexible funding programs, non-profit partner programs and grants (ex. Western PA Conservancy, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Stroud Water Research Center, etc.), and individual county-level initiatives resulting from the Countywide Action Plans. Collectively, these efforts have generated significant momentum. This momentum has resulted in increased investment, implementation, and overall acceptance and support for buffers. Through these efforts, Pennsylvania will benefit from not only improved water quality provided by buffers, but also the array of co-benefits beyond water quality improvement.

Even with this recent infusion of resources, innovation, and collaboration, planting a riparian forest buffer still requires the decision of individual farmers and landowners. This human aspect to watershed restoration is a significant and important reality- we're asking farmers and landowners to change their behaviors and practices. Our programs so far have focused on meeting these individual needs, values, and objectives to aid in their decision-making, but we have yet to identify a single, statewide solution for significantly scaling up implementation. As such, the following set of strategies aim to build on our existing foundation and momentum, provide additional resources for programs that are currently working, and explore new options and models for funding, incentives, outreach, and overall implementation.

Pennsylvania has five areas of strategic focus:

1. Convening Partners and Stakeholders

- Continue work with the Riparian Forest Buffer Advisory Committee
 - Reinvigorate quarterly meetings to seek member feedback on Riparian Forest Buffers (RFB) issues as they arise. These are the key partners currently engaged in buffers who will be able to further increase the rate of implementation in Pa.
 - Continue to invest in Regional Watershed Forestry Program Specialists, Watershed Forestry Program Coordinator, and Watershed Forestry Program Manager positions to lead these efforts and serve as regional point-people and a central point-person for buffer work in Pa.
- Continue hosting annual Watershed Forestry Summit
 - Utilize this Summit as an output of information to update, and train RFB practitioners in Pa. and beyond.
 - Develop Technical Assistance (TA) excellence through participation in this event annually.
 - Build community around buffer efforts in Pa. to normalize the work and increase collaboration and comradery.
- Continue to work directly with Pa DEP on the WIP
 - Leverage partnership to set goals, maximize usage of available funding, to best communicate with partners and counties, and to appropriately track, report, and verify RFBs.
 - Work with groups implementing Community Action Plans and align DCNR efforts with the tiered-county approach developed by DEP to target areas with the most opportunities for RFBs.
- Explore further partnership opportunities with Pa. Department of Agriculture
 - Consider opportunities that exist to conduct outreach with properties enrolled in the farmland preservation program.
 - Consider partnering with Farmland Preservation to further incorporate RFBs in rankings for competitive funding.
 - Request feedback on outreach and communication strategies and material development for the ag community with a farmer's perspective in mind.

2. Communications and Outreach

- Emphasize consistent messaging to normalize RFBs as a practice across Pa.
 - Continue to outreach via the current Prime Prospects targeting strategy (based on landowner willingness/consumer data analysis)- work to make this strategy more accessible to partners.
 - Continue to outreach about the availability of materials created via Buffer My Stream; ensure partners know these materials are available and editable.
 - Continue to fund outreach work through DCNR Community Conservation Partnerships Program (C2P2) grants, explore other avenues for funding buffer outreach as needed.
 - Address climate change in relation to buffers, share best practices, and target strategies associated with climate change and buffers when available.
 - Continue to communicate and share outreach about buffer maintenance, expectations for landowners around maintenance, and how to get assistance.
 - Ex. the Pa. REAP Program through the State Conservation Commission can help reimburse landowners for buffer maintenance via tax credits but is not widely known.
- Understand various audiences, and speak their language
 - Partner with PA Farm Bureau to receive feedback on outreach materials
 - Connect with local governments (bureaus, townships, etc.) to understand how to outreach about buffers in communities.
 - Further develop understanding of non-ag buffer audiences.

- Continue to build on Prime Prospects strategy to develop outreach strategies informed by human dimensions and social science.
- Provide communications/public engagement trainings annually, via the Watershed Forestry Summit.
- Work with local champions to share case studies and success stories; encourage neighbor-to-neighbor outreach whenever possible. Note that good maintenance is critical to these outreach strategies, so investments in maintenance will be very important.
- Engage with local partners to avoid duplicating efforts
 - Connect with County Conservation Districts, watershed groups, conservancies, and communities to understand what riparian forest buffer efforts they are engaged in already, and how to strategically align, leverage synergies, and help each other.

3. Financial Assistance

- Utilize flexible funding
 - USDA programs are wonderful tools for the right landowner but creating flexible funding tools that serve landowners who are not the best fit for federal programs to fill the gaps will help get more acres planted.
 - Pa. will continue to implement its “Stream ReLeaf”-style funding program whenever appropriate funds and funding avenues are available.
 - Make any Pa. funding programs as flexible as possible, without compromising on the integrity of buffers planted through those programs.
 - Examine length of landowner agreements and contracts, consider shortening when and where possible.
- Match landowners to the right funding
 - Use USDA programs such as CREP, EQIP, etc. on properties that make sense. Save flexible funding opportunities for those who don’t fit into the USDA funding programs to help stretch funds as far as possible.
 - Conduct training for groups that provide TA to ensure they understand all possible buffer funding options.
 - Utilize Regional Watershed Forestry Specialists as repositories of this knowledge and go-to experts in their areas of service.
- Develop new, creative methods for funding, while continuing to find funds to support tested methods
 - Continue to develop new Restoration ITQ for buffer planting through the Commonwealth, work with Dept of General Services to get contractors qualified under the correct commodity code.
 - Work with DCNR Procurement and Legal to discover additional mechanisms to get funding to partners and landowners within Pennsylvania.
 - Continue to examine opportunities to develop funding mechanisms for maintenance specifically.
 - Provide administrative support and reduce administrative burden for grantees and those we fund whenever and however possible.
 - Minimize required matching funds from partner organizations whenever possible.
 - Continue to fund the implementation of multifunctional buffers for interested landowners, and work when appropriate to further develop markets to incentivize these kinds of buffers for more landowners moving forward.
 - Scale up existing programs through infusion of federal funds, and through increasing state funding.
 - Ensure funding is available for buffer plantings on state-owned and other public lands where opportunities exist.
 - Do outreach on the Keystone Tree Fund and encourage donations.

- Continue to explore opportunities to pursue conservation finance funding mechanisms in Pennsylvania. Seek support from experts to pursue this.
- Incorporate any new funding streams from proposed sources like the Clean Streams Bill or Growing Greener III into buffer programs.
- Continue to work with funders like the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), The United States Forest Service (USFS), and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) to pursue new funding options through programs (like IJJA, ATBC, etc.) while also pursuing funding through typical streams like NFWF Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Reduction (INSR), EPA Chesapeake Bay Implementation Grants (CBIG) and Chesapeake Bay Regulatory Accountability Program (CBRAP), etc.
 - Demonstrate ability to spend money quickly; focus on above-listed plans to work w/in Pa. DCNR to understand and develop all possible funding streams.
- Encourage partners to pursue a variety of grants to support their buffer work.
 - Assist partners with applications when possible, or act as an overarching applicant that can distribute funds if specific funding avenues are more easily accessible by state governments.
 - Provide letters of support to partner organizations pursuing grants that can leverage funding for buffer work in Pa.

4. Technical Assistance

- Increase overall TA capacity in Pa.
 - Add additional regional staff positions within DCNR or utilizing DCNR partnership with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC).
 - Provide funding to partner organizations to add additional staff positions to work on buffers.
 - Help build capacity within partner organizations by working with technical assistance providers engaged in watershed work, but not buffers, or to increase amount of engagement with buffers.
 - Encourage and support TA positions that pay a fair wage, have stability, and provide good working environments for individuals.
 - Consider developing planting plan reimbursement program (similar to one in NY) to help fund TA at partner organizations.
- Set a standard of TA excellence.
 - Provide trainings, both in conjunction with the Watershed Forestry Summit, and otherwise, to ensure TA are well-trained and effective.
 - Ensure TA providers build trusting relationships with landowners with whom they are working, and to maintain those relationships beyond initial implementation, through the maintenance phase.
- Establish TA within a variety of organization types.
 - Work with DCNR Regional Watershed Forestry Specialists to encourage County Conservation Districts, watershed groups, Trout Unlimited and Ducks Unlimited chapters, Master Watershed Stewards, conservancies, and others to further engage in buffer work.
 - Support workforce development, and TA available through private businesses for outreach, planting, and maintenance.
 - Continue incorporating buffers in workforce development programs, such as the PA Outdoor Corps, and the Correctional Conservation Collaborative/Prison Program

5. Engage Leadership

- Continue engaging leaders through administration transition.
 - Prepare to communicate program goals, accomplishments, and strategies.

- Celebrate successes
- Solidify RFB Action Strategy.
 - Update this strategy regularly; annually if possible
 - Communicate updated strategy with leadership as updates occur
- Continue collaboration between PA DCNR, DEP and Pa. Department of Agriculture.
 - Continue to collaborate and coordinate
 - Continue to invite DEP, Ag leadership to DCNR events such as the Watershed Forestry Summit, plantings, etc.
- Make connections with leaders on issues that matter.
 - Develop communications and information connecting buffers to decreased flooding and flood damage, increased property values, benefits of buffers for farmers, buffers as carbon sinks, buffers for climate change mitigation, etc.
- Work with Chesapeake Bay Program Leadership.
 - Report buffer progress annually through PA DEP, PracticeKeeper, and other tracking mechanisms as needed, such as FieldDoc.
 - Continue to demonstrate ability to nimbly spend implementation funding, and continue to demonstrate demand for flexible funding in Pa.
 - Invite Bay Program leadership to events, engage in plantings as appropriate, etc.
 - Regularly communicate needs as they evolve, and progress.