

Protected Lands Workgroup

April 30, 2025

2:30 - 4:30pm



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Protected Lands 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.

Attendees:

Aurelia Gracia (NPS),

Britt Slattery (NPS),

Cheryl Wise (MD DNR),

Ashley Rebert (PA DCNR),

Michelle Campbell (DC),

Sophie Waterman (USGS),

Coral Howe (USGS),

Peter Claggett (USGS),

Ben Alexandro (CCP),

Chase Douglas (CCP),

Emily Heller (CBP Grants),

Daniel Koval (Protected Lands Staffer),

Patrick Fanning (CBF),

Jeff Lerner (EPA, HWGIT)

2:30 PM **Welcome/ Introductions**

2:45 PM **Review of Submitted Protected Lands Outcome Language**

Reviewing what was submitted: [PLWG Outcome Language Template 2025.04.15 V2.docx](#)

3:00 PM **Discussion**

Michelle Campbell: For wetlands, are the buffers considering the land around the wetlands, and is this part of the overall wetlands outcome metric?

Peter Claggett: The idea is to protect lands to allow tidal marshals to retreat with sea level rise. What we're seeing in land use data is development right up to the edge of tidal wetlands. To prevent that from happening everywhere, we want to conserve those retreat areas. There are

lots of different ways to estimate that, but we can soon provide a defensible acreage estimate of what that land looks like and its distribution. Working with Chris guy from wetlands workgroup.

Michelle Campbell: When reporting back on acreage protected for this wetland area, if it is in the buffer zone it could potentially be upland currently but might be projected to be future wetland. Right?

Peter Clagget: Right, and all of these things are essentially a GIS overlay exercise. If we have good tracking of protected lands information through space and time, then we can overlay all the sensitive areas and resources. So tracking the data shouldn't be that hard as long as we have good protected lands data attributes.

Ben Alexandro: What does it mean to be the highest functioning sub watersheds? What is the overlay that determines if it's the highest functioning sub watershed?

Peter Clagget: For one, it would be helpful to change that wording to 'high functioning watersheds' rather than highest. We don't have a good answer yet. From GIS side of things, we've been looking at a couple ways of defining that; one would be where we have a healthy watershed determined by the Chesapeake watershed assessment. And we have a sampled stream within that watershed that is in good condition. So you have two lines of evidence. The landscape looks forested and natural, and they went in and sampled the stream and they said the stream looks good. So that would be one way. If you require the sampling of streams, it narrows the acreage of areas you're looking at quite a bit. There are potentially other ways.

Aurelia Gracia: For the timeline of confirming the metrics, I just randomly decided August. It seems not too long and not too short. But there is a management board meeting next week, and we are not sure what would come out of that. It could either confirm what people propose as their estimates or have people set the schedule.

Peter Clagget: Looking at numbers that I shared with the healthy watershed leadership team, if you look across the entire watershed and ask where do I have watersheds that are predicted to be in good condition, at least 70% forested, and have a sample stream in good or excellent condition, that's 180,000 acres (213 watersheds.) You could use those criteria as defining high functioning sub watersheds. You could say let's take that and do a sampling in each state to cut it down even further, but just to have a number to wrap your head around, that is one way. And it's not evenly distributed - mostly watersheds in PA, WV, VA, maybe one or two in western maryland.

Aurelia Gracia: To monitor it, would we use a criteria like 'forested'? (for watershed health specifically like high / highest functioning)

Peter Clagget: That's another question that needs to be answered. How much land in a healthy watershed needs to be protected in order to claim that you're maintaining its health. The only

benchmark we have is generally watersheds that are 70% natural and tend to be in good condition. All this needs a lot more thought. Another way to look at it is if forests and wetlands in the watershed were developed, how much could be developed without adversely affecting the health of the watershed?

Chase Douglas: Regarding urban lands, is there a piece of this in the public access submission?

Aurelia Gracia: Yes, but we are still massaging that. We have agreed that the Protected Lands Workgroup would focus on the acres of protection for urban lands / community lands. We will rely on USGS with the definition based on the data pulled from the states. Then the Public Access Workgroup will focus on the access part of those lands.

Chase Douglas: The tribal lands piece looks to be in line with discussions with Desiree from Indigenous Conservation Council, and she has started getting more feedback from the tribes.

Jeff Lerner: Some of these are overlapping. Some intact areas in a watershed health area are also forested; just want to point that out, that we aren't picking specific categories, but looking at the relationship.

Aurelia Gracia: Thank you for mentioning that, yes, we agreed that overlap is okay because it is still getting towards that total protection acres.

Discussion on the Overall Acreage Number:

Cheryl Wise: State of MD's goal is to conserve 40% of our land by 2040, and in order to do that it is an additional 600,000 acres from what we have done. That is an ambitious goal subject to lots of factors. How would the math add up in terms of the goal setting?

Aurelia Gracia: I appreciate your calculation on what Maryland's focusing on. A lot of other responses have been due to effects of capacity and funding issues. Maybe we go back to the states to see if each jurisdiction has a specific acreage goal.

Cheryl Wise: In terms of goal setting, we have annual goals and a good metric for establishing goals is what we've achieved. Is that what the 1.5 or 2 million is based on in terms of how things are running?

Aurelia Gracia: Some states have seen funding decreased but looking at previous outcome language, we strived for 2 million acres on top of the 2010 baseline. Based on 2022 data, we were 83% of the way to making the goal and USGS is currently working on 2024 data which should be out by June.

Cheryl Wise: I can circle back to you on which way to go for 1.5 or 2 million.

Aurelia Gracia: I know some have felt the current 2 million goal has been a struggle to get there.

Ben Alexandro: I encourage the states to think about being as ambitious as we can. In MD, it was important to have that 40 by 40 goal when there was conversation about cutting Program Open Space. So that's where I think getting those extra resources could be helpful in terms of finding those resources with an ambitious job. I think it's important at the very least to not slow down our progress and at least continue the progress going forward.

Michele Campbell: would love 1.5 or 2 million but recognize that DC is small, so I don't want to commit to something large for others who may face more challenges in doing so.

Ashley Rebert: Since 2010, our rate shows 21,400 acres protected per year. If we can at least stay on the course, that gives us an additional 322,000 acres to get to 2040. I think for us to get to our 30% we need an additional 800,000 acres in the watershed. I don't know what folks in the executive level from our administration have discussed regarding a percentage that PA is willing or ready to state as a goal / rate. So my recommendation was more on the 1/1.5 million because I know what we have been trending. With that annual trend, a 1.5 million acre goal will still be shooting for the stars and do above and beyond what we've been doing on an annual basis over the past 10 years.

Aurelia Gracia: I appreciate that. Going into a MB meeting, they might ask how we got to that number, so we may want some data backing our consideration up. So you saying the estimates of what you've been doing annually and another projection of what your future rates could be would be very helpful. We could ask each of the jurisdictions for that so we can be confident in whatever acreage number we are asking for. If states want to do their own percentage, that's their own thing, we don't need to know that for the workgroup. We just look at the entire watershed data. We don't want to put us in a spot that is percentage based on each jurisdiction. Daniel and I can circle back and figure out an annual rate for each jurisdiction.

Jeff Lerner: Reflecting on this conversation, I wonder if it would be helpful to think about the larger picture of where we ultimately want to go with protection in the watershed as a way to frame it? Is it possible to think about the larger picture like millions and millions of acres of protection if we want to get to 70% of watersheds intact, but then from that come up with a more realistic number for the next 10 or 15 years. We still may end up at 1.5 or 2 million acres, but we might also be painting that larger picture for folks to understand. Right now as it reads, I don't know if it is clear that once we get to 2 million additional acres, we really are not done with the work.

Aurelia Gracia: That would be helpful in the narrative piece I think. If we were to say we do 1.5 million acres every 10 years but that is ultimately going to get us x amount of acres that could show the overall picture.

Jeff Lerner: It seems like it would allow you to have the flexibility of your metric as well.

Cheryl Wise: Another thing to think about is that the easier acres to protect have already been protected, so there are logistical hurdles and more challenges the more that you protect which should be part of the equation too - maybe not in the next 10-15 years but as we look to projections beyond that. It will just become more difficult because land will be more fragmented. Conservation opportunities to protect lands will change over time. The more successful we become and other places where opportunities are lost will affect long term goal setting.

Aurelia Gracia: Yes, competition for land and the amount we have protected has to be taken into consideration.

Ashley Rebert: I agree with everything Jeff and Cheryl both said. I like the idea Jeff had within the narrative context explaining our work isn't done. If we get to 1.5 or 2 by 2040, it doesn't end there, we will continue to work toward conservation. I do know that, to echo what Cheryl said, in addition to having already protected the easy stuff, the capacity of our land trusts within PA along with our state agencies that hold land is getting maxed out. We are already seeing our state turn away properties that come on the market because they don't have the capacity to manage more land within a park unit or forest unit if it's not a real strategic investment that could accomplish a departmental priority (like specific access to a waterway or securing some connection to an adjacent community that needs access or building a connection between protected lands). The conservation happening is very strategic now, so we are getting more selective with lands that are being acquired.

Chase Douglas: I want to reiterate a little what Ben was saying that we understand these points, but one of the main things that comes into play is that this is the opportunity that we have now to put these forward. Having something more ambitious might allow us to get through some of the hardships of now and still have room for growth as we continue to have better data to support that. If we don't put that in there now, it might be harder to adjust that once we have a better understanding. Those ambitious goals can help bring in more funding and money to projects.

Aurelia Gracia: Is there a specific number in your head that could be a target that you have discussed?

Ben Alexandro: I just don't see what slowing down progress gets us. The action team was looking at 5 million by 2050, which rolls to 3.5 million acres by 2040. This group was thinking that was too much, and it's up to the states. But I would at least like us to accelerate progress a little bit. If the only options are 1.5 or 2, let's go for 2, as a more ambitious goal could bring in more partners and capacity. I don't understand what a goal that will slow down progress gets us in terms of bringing more capacity, funding, advocates, etc to the region. I'm not seeing the benefit.

Chase Douglas: I think the benefit too is that we have many metrics now included below that help us to better understand it's not just a vacuum, and instead looking at what this means for protection. It shows the impacts of what we are pushing for with these metrics.

Britt Slattery, from the chat: That's not what the goal says though. I don't think anyone will see it as slowing down progress. It's still making more progress than where we are now.

Aurelia Gracia: I don't think it's slowing down progress, but realistically setting goals based on what can be done. Cheryl said a lot of the easy land has already been protected, and the rest is more challenging. The additional targets support that.

Wrap Up and Next Steps

Daniel Koval: Moving forward, we may see more requests from the Management Board that will require more frequent meetings with the workgroup. We will do our best to accommodate people's schedules, but just know that we may be in more frequent contact than the normal quarterly meetings. Additionally, I will be reaching out with two things: (1) a poll to set up the next few quarterly meetings, preferably for up to a year in advance to get them on the calendar. And (2), I will be reaching out to state representatives to get confirmation on who the state contact(s) for the Protected Lands Workgroup is, and if there are other people we should include in these discussions.