

2022 Chesapeake Riparian Forest Buffer Action Strategies: Summary and Next Steps

Following the 2022 Chesapeake Riparian Forest Buffer Leadership Workshop, each state was asked to develop a Riparian Forest Buffer (RFB) Action Strategy, outlining how they intend to accelerate RFB implementation over the next 5-10 years and meet buffer goals established in Watershed Implementation Plans (WIPs). Every state has completed an Action Strategy except for Virginia, who is currently seeking contractor support to facilitate the creation of their Action Strategy. Virginia anticipates having their final strategy in place no later than June 2023. The Strategies and other materials from the Leadership Workshop are available on the [Forestry Workgroup](#) webpage.

Common Priorities in the RFB Action Strategies

Although there is some variation from state-to-state in terms of how they plan to accelerate RFB implementation, a few common priorities emerged:

Support effective, flexible buffer programs

In some states, there are already effective, flexible buffer programs in place that complement the long-standing Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). Although CREP facilitated some early successes with buffer planting in the watershed, there are limitations with the design and delivery of CREP that, despite previous efforts, have not improved (see Narrative Analysis for more details). The details of these flexible buffer programs vary, but some characteristics that have been particularly effective include funding buffers on a rolling basis (rather than an annual, competitive grant process), making funding available quickly, providing buffers to agricultural and non-agricultural landowners, providing maintenance, and limiting or eliminating out-of-pocket costs for landowners. To accelerate progress, these programs need increased and dedicated, stable sources of funding.

Other states need funding to support the development of new programs, which they plan to largely model off other successful programs in the watershed. For example, Delaware's Action Strategy proposes to develop a new Delaware Conservation Buffer Program, but dedicated funding is needed.

Build capacity

Additional staff capacity will be essential to scale-up forest buffer implementation while offering high-quality technical and maintenance services. These services are needed not only to ensure planting projects are successful, but also to maintain positive landowner perceptions of projects and programs. Retaining staff is also essential, as maintaining a long-term presence can help establish relationships and build trust with landowners. To this end, it is important to support technical assistance positions that pay a fair wage, have stability, and provide good working environments for individuals.

The ultimate utility of these Strategies in accelerating progress will depend on continued engagement by leadership. To that end, we are making the following requests to support Strategy implementation:

1. Commit to a tracking and accountability framework for the state Action Strategies:

- Report on progress in 2-year programmatic milestones.
- Provide annual updates on plan implementation at MB meetings between now and 2025.

2. a) Support investments in effective, standalone flexible buffer programs.

b) Improve grant and funding provisions to better support building capacity in staff, contractors and outreach.

In addition to building internal partner capacity, capacity for planting and maintenance can be built through increased engagement with trained contractors, maintenance crews, and coordinated volunteer efforts. Developing additional training resources or programs could help build capacity within existing and new partner organizations. However, there are also opportunities to increase utilization of existing training resources. For example, additional trainings could be held in conjunction with the Pennsylvania Watershed Forestry summit. The Chesapeake Bay Landscape Professional Buffer Certificate Course could also help increase the number of private landscapers who can plant and maintain buffers.

Cultivate partnerships

Partnerships between state agencies, federal agencies, non-profits, and other entities have been critical for supporting the development of flexible and effective buffer programs. Partnerships have enabled more work to get done on the ground by providing diverse funding streams and enabling greater coordination in providing technical assistance to landowners. Pennsylvania's Riparian Forest Buffer Advisory Committee provides a model for regularly convening key stakeholders involved with RFB restoration that could be replicated elsewhere.

Invest in maintenance

Maintenance for at least three years after a buffer planting is critical for ensuring newly planted trees can survive and grow into an effective buffer. It is therefore important to have dedicated funding streams for maintenance and build financial assistance for maintenance into grant programs where possible. Standalone buffer programs that provide all maintenance following plantings have proven to be very popular among landowners.

However, maintenance payments through CREP are currently inadequate. Additional funding streams are needed to support maintenance for landowners enrolled in CREP. State or federal funds (through CBIG or otherwise) could potentially be dedicated to this purpose and could support paying contractors to complete the maintenance and provide the needed supplies. For programs that are unable to adequately fund maintenance, it is important to continue to communicate about the importance of buffer maintenance, expectations for landowners around maintenance, and how to get assistance.

Conduct outreach

Additional outreach to diverse audiences is needed to incentivize buffer planting. Although agricultural landowners tend to be the primary target of buffer programs, there may also be opportunities to work with landowners in more developed landscapes and homeowner's associations to plant buffers. Messaging about the benefits of buffers should be tailored so they resonate with and reach these various audiences. There also may be opportunities to incorporate buffers into existing communications or marketing campaigns. For example, buffers could be integrated into Maryland's 5 Million Trees initiative.

Ensure practices are verified

Every year riparian forest buffers are removed from the watershed model (CAST) due to credit expiration. In order for states to continue to receive full credit for a buffer in the watershed model (CAST), the buffer needs to be verified within 15 years post-planting to ensure it is still present and functioning as intended.