What's Needed Now: Riparian Forest Buffer Restoration in the Chesapeake

Gap Between Commitments and Action

Over decades, science has consistently demonstrated that riparian forest buffers (RFB) are one of the most effective and cost-efficient water quality practices with high co-benefits for ecosystems and people. Given this, it is understandable that the Bay Program's goals for this practice have increased over the years. Unfortunately, the necessary programs, financing, and other systems needed to reach these goals have not followed suit.

Chesapeake Forest Buffer Goals	
1996 -	**2,100 miles**
2003 -	**10,000 miles**
2007 & 2014-	**900 miles/year**
2019 (WIP3) -	**1,700 miles/year**

Use Existing Programs

Riparian forest buffer plantings across the watershed remain dependent on several isolated federal and state programs. For example, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is still an essential program but even if CREP was functioning consistently and well, it would deliver an estimated 15-20% of the total need for buffers in some states. A more integrated approach aligning multiple programs is needed.

An immediate opportunity would be to link a buffer requirement with other existing public-funded landowner assistance programs. For example, in the Upper Susquehanna, in order to access funds for a conservation easement, landowners are required to have riparian forest buffers. In that example, a leader made buffers a priority to access other funding. Such *"Buffer And…" programs could be developed throughout the watershed.*

The New Natural Filters Restoration Program

To move beyond the status quo, a comprehensive new program --the Natural Filters Restoration Program (NFRP)—is proposed. This program would be driven by a consistent public-private funding stream that is essential to develop the needed restoration workforce and economy. The NFRP is envisioned as Bay-wide but would likely operate differently in each state. The goal of the Program is to scale up establishment of riparian forest buffers, wetlands, and other new forests by efficient delivery and ease to the landowner. Bay leadership is needed now to start setting up partnerships and identifying pools of public funding (e.g., EPA Clean Water State Revolving Funds) that can be leveraged to attract private dollars.

Improved Coordination

Coordinated and strategic action is urgently needed to better prioritize and incentivize buffer planting throughout the watershed by 2025. *CBP and WQ GIT leadership should develop state-wide RFB action strategies that bring together a broad coalition* of public, foundation and private initiatives. These coalitions should be formalized and should have active and ongoing involvement from state and CBP water quality programs. Enhanced technical assistance will be a priority for this coalition to address.

Enhanced Technical Assistance

An extensive buffer TA workforce, supported by the latest tools and incentives, is needed to recruit landowners as well as provide a point of contact for planning, planting, and maintenance. This will involve cross-training across sectors. In order to reduce turnover, which further stalls progress, buffer TA providers must be better compensated for their efforts. Training and expanding the buffer TA workforce is a good investment. While landowners need assistance initially, once established, buffers require little maintenance and can provide long-term benefits.

Natural Filters Restoration Program

The NFRP is modeled after various programs that have been piloted in Bay states. Some attributes that are incorporated into NFRP are:

- Efficient, one-stop-shop for technical and financial assistance
- No out-of-pocket expenses for landowners
- Maintenance is provided
- Flexible to meet landowner needs
- Available to non-agricultural landowners
- Continual operations (first-come-first serve)
- Easy to enroll