

Riparian Forest Buffer Management Strategy

I. Executive Summary

[To be completed by Communications Team---will emphasize some take-aways in the *Buffering the Bay* report-- such as the federal programs that are currently underutilized and that will be made stronger in order to augment restore and conservation of buffers.]

II. Outcomes and Baselines

Riparian Forest Buffer (RFB) Outcome-- "Continually increase the capacity of forest buffers to provide water quality and habitat benefits throughout the watershed. Restore 900 miles per year of riparian forest buffer and conserve existing buffers until at least 70 percent of riparian areas throughout the watershed are forested."

The above Outcome is somewhat less than the 2011 State targets (from input deck) in Phase 2 of Watershed Implementation Plans for the TMDL which is measured in acres:

	Total Acres Needed 2012-2025	Average acres/year Needed	Miles/year Needed (at 100' width)
Delaware	4790	370	31
Maryland	1190	90	8
New York	6180	475	40
Pennsylvania	89630	6895	575
Virginia	80820	6215	518
West Virginia	3250	250	21
Total	185,860	14,295	1,193

Table 1. Watershed Implementation Plan targets for Phase 2, reported in acres. The final column is a conversion to miles for reference.

2010 Federal Commitment from the Strategy for Protecting and Restoring the Chesapeake Bay Watershed (Executive Order 13508):

Riparian Forest Buffer Outcome—"Restore riparian forest buffers to 63% of the total riparian miles by 2025. Watershed-wide, this equates to 900 miles of restoration every year."

Note: The reason the Executive Order Outcome reflects a different long term goal than the Bay Agreement Outcome (63% vs 70%) is that the EO Outcome had a sunset date of 2025. Having 70% of the watershed's riparian areas in forest has always been the long-term goal—but buffer experts estimated that only 63% of the watershed would have forest buffer by 2025 at the rate of 900 miles per year.

What federal agencies agreed to do to reach this Outcome:

- Accelerate application of CREP.
- Restore forest buffers in priority watersheds.
- Explore funding incentives for installation of priority riparian forest buffers.

- Enhance technical capacity for riparian forest restoration.

III. Progress

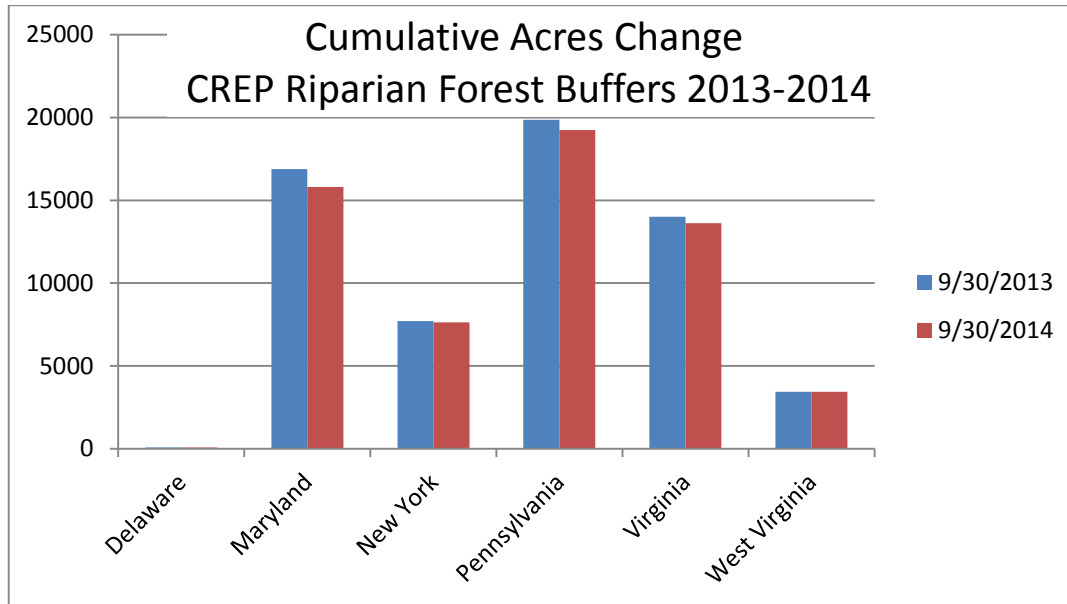


Figure 1. Cumulative Acres in riparian forest buffer contract (CP22) between 2013 and 2014. Downturn in cumulative acres indicates that new forest buffer enrollment is not keeping up with the number of expiring contracts that are not re-enrolled. Some of the expiring acres may stay in forest buffer, but it is not known how many or why the landowner did not want to re-enroll.

Chesapeake Riparian Forest Buffer Initiative:

Federal, state, and private partners have been working together to restore the Chesapeake Bay watershed for over 30 years. Since the first Chesapeake Bay goals were set, nearly 8,000 miles of forest buffers have been planted in the Bay watershed, many with the strong support of USDA programs.

For the Riparian Forest Buffer Initiative, federal, state and private partners will carefully examine past and current efforts and identify opportunities for the changes needed to greatly accelerate implementation of riparian forest buffers. The need for the Initiative was outlined in a report released by the Forestry Workgroup in January 2014 called [Buffering the Bay](#). The Initiative was envisioned as a means of getting stakeholder feedback to help develop this Management Strategy.

The first step in the Initiative was to form an interagency Steering Committee (March 2015) in order to drive the process. Farm Service Agency took a lead role by providing funding to the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay to hold the Summit. A Stakeholder Roundtable was convened in May. A Riparian Forest Buffer Leadership Summit was held in June. At the annual Chesapeake Forum in September, a session was held to get more feedback from interested parties that would feed the Initiative and Management Strategy process. The Leadership Summit kicked off a State Task Force process that produced draft strategies in early November. A full-day Forestry Workgroup meeting was held December 4, 2014 to identify some initial priority strategies. The State Task Forces will have a chance to integrate this draft Management Strategy into their final reports due at the end of February 2015. A final report for the Riparian Forest Buffer Initiative will be produced in Spring 2015.

IV. **Jurisdictions and agencies participating in the Management Strategy**

Federal: FSA, NRCS, USFS, USGS, USFWS, DoD, EPA, NPS, USACE

State Gov't:

Delaware: FS, DNREC

Maryland: MDA, DNR, MDE

New York: DEC,

Pennsylvania: DEP, DCNR,

Virginia: DOF, DCR

West Virginia: DOF, DEP

Local Gov't:

Anne Arundel Co, Cumberland, Arlington, Prince Georges,

Non-Governmental: ACB, CBF, TU, TNC, Cacapon, Casey Trees, Parks and People

V. **Influential factors**

- a. Federal programs that are available to pay for the RFB practice are underutilized
- b. Fluctuation in commodity crop values (they are lower now than 2 years ago)
- c. Technical assistance
- d. Education of landowners and technical assistance providers
- e. Survival of plantings
- f. Need for periodic maintenance
- g. Streamline program application and implementation

VI. **Current efforts and gaps**

- a. Lack of clear guidance at federal and state level that the RFB practice is a priority
 - i) Federal agencies do not honor state Watershed Implementation Plan priority practices
 - ii) States don't see their role(s) in federal programs
- b. state-level goals not aligned with 900 mile goal
- c. Federal program payments/incentives are not up-to-date
- d. Lack of leveraging of RFB practice investments with other federal, state, and private conservation programs
- e. Perception that RFBs are difficult/problematic
 - i) Survival (extend establishment period)
 - ii) Maintenance
- f. Training, outreach, communication, information-- needs to be improved for technical service providers and landowners alike
- g. Technical assistance and outreach-- need increased staffing and improved approach
- h. Expiring acres coming out of CREP buffer contracts (not re-enrolling)
- i. Targeting tools not often used
- j. Riparian forest buffer easement programs are not active in most states
- k. No strong program for RFB on suburban lands

VII. Management Approach

Priority Strategic Management Approaches

The most effective strategies are summarized here:

- **More leadership actions to emphasize this practice as a priority**
 - Find opportunities for state leadership to highlight the importance of RFB
 - Develop state-specific goals (to align with WIP goals?)
- **Improve existing programs to make the RFB practice more appealing to landowners**
 - Increase and improve Technical Assistance (TA)
 - Increase staffing, training, and partnerships to provide TA
 - Clear priority from higher leadership levels: NRCS staff are incentivized and have outcome goals for performance.
 - Enhance maintenance, provide maintenance help to landowner
 - Adjust BMP rankings to prioritize the riparian forest buffer practice (State Technical Committees have a role)
 - Update State CREP Agreements – increase flexibility and incentives
 - Produce coordinated, cost-effective Outreach across the watershed
 - Prioritize expiring acres for re-enrollment
 - Write watershed-wide proposal for Outreach funding
 - Adjust BMP rankings to prioritize the riparian forest buffer practice
 - State Technical Committees have a role
- **Make new program linkages and use financial leverage to conserve and restore more RFB**
 - Look broadly to align related projects/funding (e.g., state preservation programs, stream restoration, etc.)
 - Value RFB as part of state stormwater programs
- **Apply science and technology to improve the RFB practice**
 - Use geographic prioritization tools
 - Include habitat targeting tools i.e., brook trout
 - Improve tracking of existing RFB

Summary of Recommended Actions from Draft Task Force Reports

A. Increase Financial Assistance

1. Increase payments/incentives for riparian forest buffer, e.g.:
 - a. Update/increase marginal pastureland and cropland rental rates
 - b. Remove payment caps for: (1) water development, (2) water facilities, (3) stream crossing, and (4) adjacent upland pastures.
 - c. Develop awards program
 - d. Provide Special Incentive Payments if certain environmental targets are achieved – Oregon CREP Model
2. Link EQIP/CSP eligibility (additional ranking points) to having RFBs
 - a. EQIP could do more to leverage the implementation of riparian forest buffers through CREP in application rankings. This limits the ability to leverage funding and provide a substantial incentive for riparian forest buffers.
 - b. Improve CSP structure to support forest buffers
3. Utilize State/local/private easement to provide long-term resource protection

B. Improve Technical Assistance

1. Improve staffing to provide better technical assistance for riparian forest buffers and related practices
 - a) NRCS often has limited funds made available through the Farm Service Agency, but there is not a way for the FSA to directly contract with technical assistance providers
 - b) Local level leadership should prioritize TA for riparian forest buffers ---counties that prioritize riparian forest buffers have more success than those that do not
 - c) State Farm Service Agency and NRCS offices lack outcome-based performance measures to assess success (e.g., miles and acres of riparian forest buffer established)
 - d) Develop “team” of experts--- could be circuit riders shared among counties—train knowledgeable of opportunities and program requirements. Provide materials (posters, pamphlets, question and answers, etc.)
 - e) More training for technical service providers, land trusts, and other partners on the importance of riparian forest buffers, assessment of the costs/benefits forest buffers for landowners, and marketing strategies.
2. Customer service
 - a) Application process needs to be streamlined especially for offices where partners are not co-located. Agencies that are working together with a streamlined process have more success than those that do not.
 - b) Landowners do not always have a point-of-contact that they can rely on for guidance for the life of the contract
 - c) Conduct annual status reviews
 - d) Involve landowner during all stages of the planning process
 - e) Certify all practice performance
 - f) Develop network of providers to deliver full services to producers -(construct fence, water facilities, stream crossing, site prep, tree planting, and maintenance
 - g) Work and share more information with the contractors

C. Improve Outreach

- a) Simplify program communication to “plain English”
 - b) Develop and maintain a database of potential clients -use the data base to prioritize outreach efforts – use GIS data
 - (1) Provide additional resources (databases) to the State to target outreach efforts
 - (2) Train staff on outreach marketing opportunities and program requirements. Provide staff outreach materials (posters, pamphlets, question and answers, fact sheets and guides etc)
2. Develop marketing platform
 - a) Develop a vibrant WEB presence – with updated program information and “one-stop shop” website
 - b) Have USDA/ERS mine data on existing enrollment to better understand the demographics of CRP participation and their operations
 - c) Develop demographic media materials (dairy vs. grain producer, older vs. new farmer, tenant vs. absentee landowner, etc.)
 - d) Conduct focus groups and do other analysis to better understand how to market the program
 - e) Develop a State outreach committee comprised of major program participants
 - f) Identify and conduct RFB farm tours
 - g) Include Agroforestry message into the marketing
 - h) Explore the use of Public Service Announcements
 - i) Develop RFB signage that denotes RFBs to the general public
 3. Improve outreach through partners/programs
 - a) Use one-on-one outreach efforts – through the use of staff with good backgrounds of buffers and good marketing skills
 - b) Seek to increase role of partners in outreach, particularly groups that have a huge mailing list such as Farm Bureau
 - c) Work with State Agencies to cross-sell RFB enrollments when discussing Ag certainty.
 - d) Explore outreach possibilities with partners with successful RCPP
 - e) Deliver consistent message to producers, from multiple sources
 4. Develop a 1-800-CREP hotline

D. Improve Establishment, Maintenance, Compliance, Re-enrollment

1. Establishment
 - a) Successful establishment of a riparian forest buffer requires long-term maintenance. Fields of leaning or downed tree-tubes and other signs of failure discourage landowners from enrolling in programs.
 - b) Incentives for establishment are inadequate and need to begin before planting and occur for at least five years
 - c) Consider new approaches and research of deer fencing, increased herbicide applications, specialized crews for establishment/maintenance
2. Maintenance

- a) Given limited incentives, landowners are often stuck with maintenance issues (e.g. invasive species, tree shelters, loss due to flooding, etc.) after the first couple of years after planting
 - b) Ensure that those responsible get a “cradle to grave” understanding of the maintenance requirements.
 - c) Provide extensive review of contract maintenance requirements and review maintenance requirements though out the contract
 - d) Seek higher maintenance rates (see financial assistance)
 - e) Streamline the weed control process (number of field visits)
3. Compliance
- a) Conduct practice certification on all practices.
 - b) Increase annual (in-field) status reviews/monitoring
 - c) Seek flexibility to re-enroll/upgrade non-compliant CP21s (grass filter strips– that have trees) to be enrolled as a CP22. Provide one-time amnesty.
 - d) Seek additional flexibility in maintenance requirements for CP21 to allow some natural regeneration (need to talk with wildlife community)
4. Re-enrollment
- a) Prioritize technical assistance resources to expiring CP22s
 - b) Many CREP contracts are set to expire in the next few years and lack the outreach and technical assistance and changing crop prices could lead to a decline in the area of riparian forest buffers.
 - c) Grass buffer contracts that have naturally regenerated to forest are unable to reenroll into a forest buffer contract.
- E. Program/Policy/Leadership Actions
- 1. Expand the acreage cap of the CREP
 - 2. Allow for flexibility to pay partial Practice Incentive Payments (PIPs)
 - 3. Allow for flexibility to raise payment caps for livestock crossing, water development, fencing, etc. (see above)
 - 4. Expand the establishment period for RFBs from 2 years to 3-4 years.
 - 5. Provide flexibility on marginal pastureland eligibility determinations.
 - 6. Flexibility to allow simultaneous enrollment in RFB in CREP and stream bank stabilization in EQIP or to award more ranking points for EQIP offers that have RFBs.
 - 7. Contract out Maryland FSA could contract out with certified TSP to do the work.
 - 8. Modify the design for CP22 standard to permit a grass strip adjacent to the drainage ditch in order to permit periodic maintenance activities of the drainage district.
 - 9. Provide better accounting of current RFB activity including NRCS and State programs.
 - 10. Farm Service Agency and NRCS goals should reflect state WIP targets.
 - 11. Lack of coordination with other federal, state, and private conservation funding programs on how investments can be leveraged.
- F. Conservation
- 1. Revive easement programs at state level;

2. Utilize state/local/private easement to provide long-term resource protection

G. Increase Use of Tools to Prioritize RFB Placement

1. Re-enrollments
2. Geographic
 - i) for water quality
 - ii) for habitat
 - iii) lots of new tools/data to use
3. Demographic
 - i) use market research (see above)
 - ii) pastures and larger farms with streams

VIII. **Monitoring and Assessing Progress**

- a. Several sources of data continue to be available to monitor progress on this goal:
 - i. Contracted acres from FSA
 - ii. Number of acres reported by states to CB Model
 - iii. Miles reported from Forestry Workgroup
- b. Data derived from high-resolution satellite imagery are starting to be more common and will help monitor progress, net gain, and survival of newly-established riparian buffers.
- c. Reports from partners on progress on actions in Management Strategy.
- d. Feedback on webinars and training

VIII. **Adaptively Manage** -- The Forestry Workgroup will use the following approaches to ensure adaptive management:

- a. Tracking progress toward the annual 900 mile goal, as well as identifying trends and priority areas.
- b. Riparian Forest Buffer Initiative provides a means to engage additional partners in providing feedback on progress and actions in the Management Strategy.
- c. Chesapeake partners involved in related goals, i.e., conservation, brook trout, wetlands, healthy watersheds and others, provide an important source of mutual feedback on what works well and what doesn't.
- d. Throughout the year, the Partnership's communications tools, including websites, webinars, and special announcements, will inform progress toward the RFB goal and highlight needs or opportunities for Partnership members to engage.
- e. Monthly Forestry Workgroup meetings provide a regular venue for evaluating and adjusting particular strategies that support the annual 900 mile goal.
- f. Annual reporting by the Partnership and its members of best practices, success stories and other qualitative and quantitative successes is another means to recognize the impacts of existing programs, reflect on and adapt existing and new strategies, and grow the capacity and stewardship required to increase the amount of riparian forest buffers in the watershed.

IX. **Biennial Work Plan**

[Partners are developing their priority actions. Work Plan will be entered in January.]