



**Stakeholders' Advisory Committee**  
TO THE CHESAPEAKE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

November 19, 2024

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The Honorable Wes Moore  
Governor of Maryland  
Chair, Chesapeake Executive Council

Dear Governor Moore,

On behalf of the Stakeholders' Advisory Committee (Stakeholders' Committee) to the Chesapeake Executive Council, we are pleased to offer the below annual recommendations for your consideration. We represent a diversity of stakeholders, including experts in land use, water quality, and community engagement, from across the Chesapeake Watershed and embrace the shared value of healthy, sustainable Rivers and Chesapeake Bay. Created in 1984, the Stakeholders' Committee continues to serve as independent volunteers bringing nonpartisan advice on restoration and protection of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.

Over the past year, the Stakeholders' Committee has reflected on the findings of the [Charting a Course to 2025](#) report of progress on the 2025 targets for the 31 Outcomes in the *2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement (Watershed Agreement)*. We note that 18 outcomes are on course, 11 outcomes are off course, and 2 are uncertain. Most notably, we acknowledge the report's ongoing challenges to get 100% of practices needed to be in place to support clean water as mandated by the Chesapeake Bay TMDL. These challenges include: "insufficient regulatory and voluntary measures not being in place to incentivize implementation in the nonpoint source sectors, water quality standards attainment needed for the deep waters of the Bay and continually changing conditions such as climate change and increasing development pressures throughout the watershed." (pg.8)

Our members have been engaged in this year's work to explore [A Critical Path Forward for the Chesapeake Bay Program Beyond 2025](#) across science, restoration and conservation, and the partnership. We support the charge to the Principals' Staff Committee (PSC) to propose amendments to the *Watershed Agreement* and streamline the Chesapeake Bay Program. The coming years will bring change. We believe the partnership is well positioned to use its state-of-the-art scientific knowledge, lessons learned over the years, and commitment to collaboration to shepherd this change in an effective way. As the ERG consultant's report [Chesapeake Bay Program Beyond 2025 Evaluation](#) recommended, we strongly encourage a culture of transparency to support productivity and trust as the Chesapeake Bay Program undertakes these initiatives. Additionally, we encourage you and the partnership to rely on the varied expertise your independent advisory committees offer.

Below are our annual recommendations as it relates to the work that lies ahead in 2025 and beyond. The key points provided by your volunteer advisors fall under the rubric of (1) accountability to water quality targets, (2) locally driven land conservation, and (3) increased engagement of community-based organizations.

Respectfully submitted,



Chuck Herrick  
Chair, Stakeholders' Advisory Committee



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## **2024 Stakeholders' Advisory Committee Annual Recommendations to the Chesapeake Executive Council**

Since the October 2023 Executive Council meeting, the Stakeholders' Advisory Committee (Stakeholders' Committee) traveled throughout the watershed to meet with agency representatives, thought leaders, and practitioners. We held quarterly meetings and panel discussions, hosted virtual learning sessions, and discussed our role in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion both internally and at the Chesapeake Bay Program. We learn from our diverse membership as well as from communities and organizations about their economic and social connections to the health of their local waterways. We follow the progress of the *Watershed Agreement* Outcomes and the Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL), while we learn about emerging issues. We appreciate the substantial progress toward Bay restoration in the light of many challenges. We recognize and thank the many persons, organizations, agencies, and others who have made a difference. Based on these discussions, the following recommendations are respectfully submitted to the executive leadership of the Chesapeake Bay Program.

## **Recommendation #1:**

### **Articulate Engagement Opportunities with the Advisory Committees**

Building on the momentum started earlier this year, the Stakeholders' Committee recommends that the Principals' Staff Committee (PSC) begin 2025 by releasing a statement on the Advisory Committees. Such a statement could affirm the unique role of each individual Advisory Committee, highlight opportunities for collaboration with the full partnership, clarify the duties of the Advisory Committee Chairs as non-voting members of the Management Board (MB) and PSC, and document plans for deeper collaboration.

## **Recommendation #2: Confirm Accountability to Water Quality Targets**

The Stakeholders' Committee emphasizes the importance of responsibility to and accountability for the jurisdictions to meet all of the water quality and living resources goals of the *Watershed Agreement* and the Bay TMDL, including the Conowingo Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP). We understand that setting a new deadline for achieving the Bay TMDL is a complex undertaking made more uncertain by modeling and other technical needs and challenges, system lag times, land use changes, climate, and a potential additional approach to tiered implementation for shallow waters. Realistic timeframes for monitored water quality attainment in the deep channel are estimated in decades.

Recent reports highlight the need for strategies to address nonpoint source pollution, including the 2023 Office of Inspector General Report: [EPA Should Update Its Strategy, Goals, Deadlines, and Accountability Framework to Better Lead Chesapeake Bay Restoration Efforts](#). We acknowledge in EPA's September 15, 2023 response to the IG report that the EPA Region 3 will "lead the Chesapeake Bay Program in developing a new strategy to specifically address nonpoint source pollution" (pg.2). In addition to encouraging the jurisdictions to fully and consistently use the existing regulatory and enforcement authorities, we encourage you to set an ambitious target for implementing the existing WIPs to provide public assurance and accountability to the water quality goals until the new targets are finalized. Specifically:

- We strongly encourage the Bay Program to commit by the end of 2025 to a new deadline for implementation of the existing Watershed Implementation Plans as a part of the revision of the *Watershed Agreement*.
- Additionally, we recommend revising the water quality accountability framework to include a new near-term deadline for the Bay TMDL and a nonpoint source pollution reduction strategy.

## **Recommendation #3:**

### **Support Locally Driven Watershed Plans that Incorporate Land Conservation**

We uplift an important healthy watersheds consideration from the [Beyond 2025 Steering Committee's Small Group Findings](#) to elevate conservation and stewardship as key guiding pillars for the Chesapeake Bay Program- "Leverage knowledge of local, state, and federal programs to conserve 30% of the land by 2030, achieve longer-term goals, and build an interconnected network of conserved landscapes". (pg 14) We believe tributary-based watershed restoration and conservation plans informed by Chesapeake Bay Program land use tools would prioritize areas that are most vulnerable to development and climate change to protect habitats and water quality and address local nonpoint source pollution.

- We recommend the jurisdictions approach their next phase of Watershed Implementation Plans to support locally driven river basin strategies to delist a target number of rivers by a future date with interim milestones along the way. This approach should include initiatives to engage communities, officials, watershed and conservation groups, land trusts, and local service providers to incentivize and allocate funds for the protection of tributaries with an emphasis on existing forests and wetlands.

#### **Recommendation # 4:**

#### **Increase Engagement of Community-Based Organizations by Lowering Grant Barriers**

Since our 2022 report on [Equitable Access to Grant Awards and Administrative Practices](#), we have heard that entities distributing Chesapeake Bay related funding pass through non-negotiable federal and state requirements as provisions of administering grants. A clear understanding of where grant reporting requirements originate, a conversation about barriers and potential solutions, and the identification of administrative flexibility could help to increase engagement of Community-Based Organizations, thereby advancing the *Watershed Agreement's* Stewardship and Diversity Outcomes. Specifically,

- We recommend the Chesapeake Bay Program partners convene a forum and action-oriented workgroups with members of the Stakeholders' Committee and include agency leaders, prevalent bay watershed foundations, and federal and state contractual, budgetary, and financial officials to identify and implement institutional and procedural changes to grant application and administrative requirements that lower barriers for Community-Based Organizations.