

The Chesapeake WILD Program

Conserving a National Treasure

Nicholas A. Tonelli CC

Background

The largest estuary in the nation, a corridor for migrating American shad and striped bass, a nursery for juvenile fish and blue crab, and the birthplace of Old Bay Seasoning: the Chesapeake Bay is a national treasure.

But by the late 20th century, pollution and mismanagement had taken a toll on this system. In response, Congress authorized the creation of the [Chesapeake Bay Program](#) to lead collaborative goal-driven restoration and protection efforts. Since its establishment in 1983, the program has moved the needle for water quality and economic recovery in the basin.

Now new legislation will authorize the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to lead a complementary effort focused on enhancing habitat for fish and wildlife, and recreational opportunities for people. The Chesapeake Watershed Investments for Landscape Defense (Chesapeake WILD) Act, signed into law in October 2020, directs the Secretary of the Interior, through the Service, to develop and implement the non-regulatory Chesapeake WILD Program.

The Act instructs the Service to draw upon existing plans for the Chesapeake Bay and adopt a watershed-wide strategy for habitat restoration and conservation, clean water, flood protection, access to outdoor recreation, and other ecosystem services. It also calls for a grant program to provide Federal funds to targeted activities, but does not yet authorize specific funds for that program.

To achieve these watershed-scale goals, the Act directs the Service to coordinate with other agencies including the Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Natural Resources

Conservation Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Governors of the Chesapeake Bay states (Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New York), the Mayor of the District of Columbia, the Chesapeake Bay Commission, fish and wildlife joint venture partnerships, and other public agencies and organizations. However the Service will seek input and participation from an even broader range of partners and stakeholders, building upon the strong collaboration and strategic work already underway in the basin.

Next Steps

With field offices, fish hatcheries, and national wildlife refuges in each of the watershed states that already work with partners to conserve fish, wildlife, and habitat, the Service is well positioned to lead this collaborative effort. Here are steps we are taking to lay the foundation for success in the Chesapeake Bay watershed:

- We have designated two employees to work with partners to develop this new program by April 28, 2021.
- We are reaching out to partners to

build upon coalitions that are already in place and learn what efforts are underway, and examining existing data, plans, and strategies.

- We are looking to an existing framework for regional conservation partnerships, known as joint ventures, as a model for ours. Joint ventures set clear, measurable goals, are flexible and inclusive, and leverage partner resources and contributions to design and implement successful landscape-scale conservation initiatives.
- While there are no supporting appropriations with which to establish a grant program at this time, the program is authorized for up to \$15 million and we are developing the infrastructure to distribute grant funds once Congress makes them available.

The Chesapeake Bay watershed is vitally important to the people and wildlife of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. We are asking our staff, as well as partners, to contribute their expertise, science, collaborative relationships, and knowledge to build a sustainable landscape for people and wildlife.



Wood turtle

Edward Post

What Makes the Chesapeake Bay Watershed a Priority Landscape?

Stretching from Cooperstown, New York, to Norfolk, Virginia, the Chesapeake Bay watershed supports a network of natural resources and communities that people and wildlife depend upon: streams, small creeks, and large rivers; forests, grasslands, and wetlands; agricultural lands, small towns, suburbs, and cities.

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in the U.S. and supports roughly 3,600 species of plants and animals, including 348 species of finfish, 173 species of shellfish and 2,700 species of plants. Nearly one million waterfowl winter on the bay – approximately one-third of the Atlantic Coast’s migratory population. The birds stop to feed and rest during their annual migration along the Atlantic Migratory Bird Flyway.

The watershed is also crucial to the health, well-being, and economy of more than 18 million people that live and work in the region, many employed in industries tied directly to the watershed, like outdoor recreation, farming, and fishing.

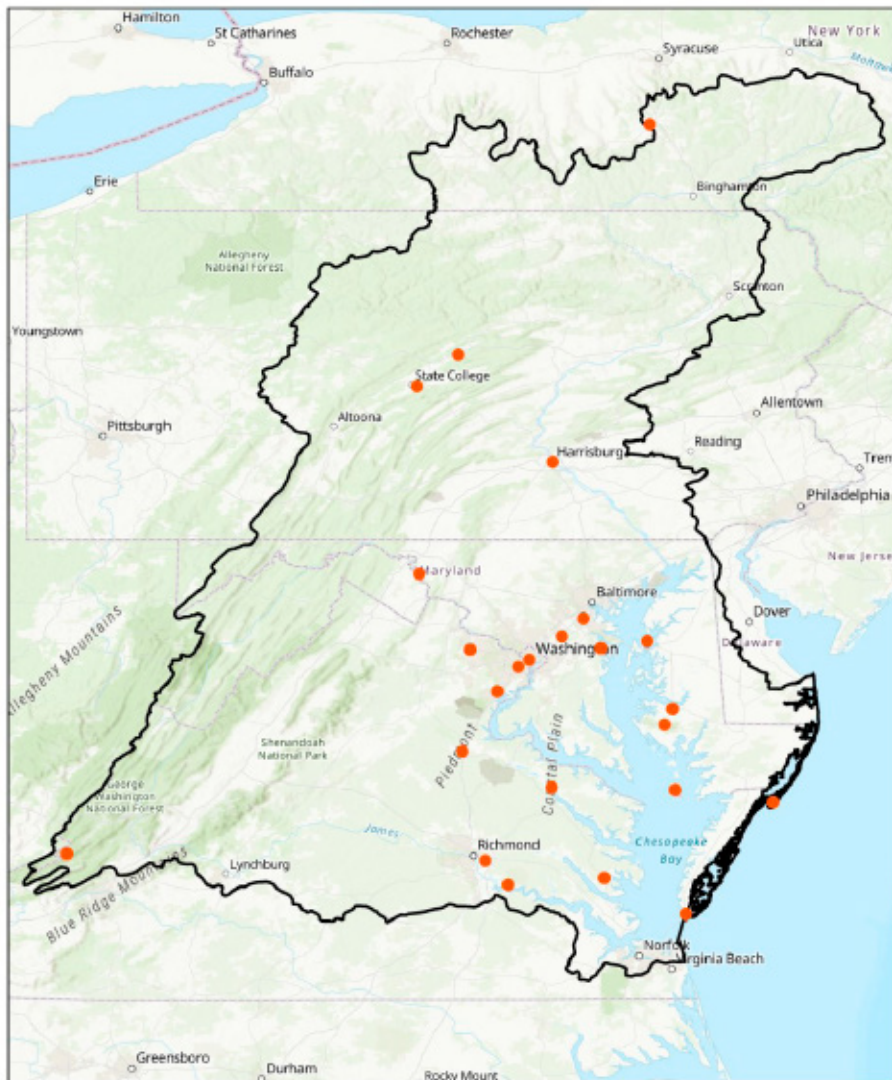
The bay produces about 500 million pounds of seafood each year, supporting jobs in both commercial and recreational fishing and bolstering the regional economy. In 2017, the commercial seafood industry in Maryland and Virginia contributed \$3.2 billion in sales, and 30,000 jobs. (NOAA, *Fisheries Economics*).

Through gear, licenses, travel, clothing, gas, and more, hunting, sport fishing, and target shooting contribute an estimated \$3.3 billion in economic value to the Chesapeake region each year. Investing in projects that enhance opportunities for people to access natural areas in watershed states will only add to this value (Southwick Associates, *America’s Sporting Heritage*).

For information and to stay connected, please contact:

Mike Slattery
410/573 4571 - (O)
202/870 1072 - (C)
michael_slattery@fws.gov

Genevieve LaRouche
410/573 4573 (O)
202/341 5882 (C)
genevieve_larouche@fws.gov



USFWS field offices, fish hatcheries, and national wildlife refuges in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Brook trout



Dustin Witcherman/Trount Unlimited

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
177 Admiral Cochrane Drive
Annapolis, MD 21401

