

# Chesapeake WILD Framework



Nicholas A. Tonelli CC

On October 30, 2020 the America's Conservation Enhancement Act became law (Public Law No: 116-188). Title 1, section 111 of the Act authorizes the creation of the Chesapeake Watershed Investments for Landscape Defense (WILD) program for the following purposes:

- Coordinate restoration and protection activities among federal, state, local, and regional entities throughout the watershed. The term “restoration and protection activity” means an activity carried out for the conservation, stewardship, and enhancement of habitat for fish and wildlife
- Engage other agencies and organizations to build capacity and generate funding for projects in the Chesapeake Bay
- Support collaborative efforts to implement conservation, stewardship, and enhancement projects

These collaborative efforts will emphasize diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) practices and policies that foster a safe, diverse, equitable, and inclusive work environment that allows for new and impactful partnerships.

Chesapeake WILD projects will focus on five subject areas or “Pillars”:

1. Sustain and enhance restoration and protection activities by conserving a resilient network of fish and wildlife habitats and connecting corridors, with emphasis on vulnerable species and habitats
2. Address climate change by increasing scientific capacity and supporting strategic planning, monitoring, and applied science activities necessary to ensure resilience of natural ecosystems and habitats impacted by changing climate and development.
3. Increase capacity and support for coordinated restoration and protection activities in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, particularly in underserved communities, through outreach, education, and civic engagement.
4. Enhance recreational opportunities and public access with a strong emphasis on equitable access to nature, consistent with the ecological needs of fish and wildlife habitat
5. Improve and sustain water quality, upgrade water-management capability, and reduce flood damage, with an emphasis on green infrastructure and natural infrastructure to support fish and wildlife, habitats of fish and wildlife, and drinking water for people

## Program Establishment

The Chesapeake WILD Program (Program) is supported by a diverse array of partners that are committed to enhancing ecological resiliency throughout the watershed, and in doing so, improving the economic health and quality of life for all people who live and work in this region. This Framework reflects Congress’s request for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to produce an overview of the program within 180 days of enactment describing a plan for implementation. The Program is intended to complement, not replace, existing work and associated funding in the watershed, by increasing coordination between partner agencies and organizations, and identifying conservation and restoration priorities with unmet funding needs that would be eligible to compete for program funds, as appropriated. In this context, Program implementation will complement EPA Chesapeake Bay Program (Bay Program) implementation, with a coordinated emphasis on the living resources and habitats, and climate-change considerations prioritized by the Bay Program and Executive Order

13508 Chesapeake Bay Protection and Restoration.

This Framework document will guide the development of a watershed-wide strategy and operational plan, and lay a foundation for a grant program that will further conserve and restore the Chesapeake Bay watershed, as funds are appropriated. This framework also describes an organizational structure for a partnership of organizations working collectively to achieve the goals of the Framework.

## Chesapeake Bay Watershed

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 economic vitality of more than 18 million people who 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).

## **Program Partnership**

### Chesapeake WILD and the Chesapeake Conservation Partnership

The Chesapeake WILD Program seeks to restore and protect a network of natural areas, corridors, and waterways on public and private lands to support thriving populations of native wildlife, migratory birds, fish, and plants, and to contribute to the social health and economic vitality of the communities in the watershed. The first step toward establishing the Program is to identify and bring together watershed partners invested in conservation to develop an organizing structure for collaboration that will inform the establishment of the Program and development of a model for operation and implementation.

We are taking this step in cooperation with the Chesapeake Conservation Partnership (CCP), a well-established partnership that can inform our process for developing shared priorities and strategies for the Chesapeake WILD program. Because of its unique structure and governance, and the diverse cross-section of partners and stakeholders it represents, the CCP is an ideal forum for convening and engaging the agencies and organizations USFWS has been directed to consult in developing the Chesapeake WILD Program. CCP presents a logical and likely platform for future Program implementation.

### The Chesapeake Bay Program and the Evolution of the Chesapeake Conservation Partnership

The Chesapeake Bay Program is a unique regional partnership that has led and directed the restoration of the Chesapeake Bay since 1983. The Bay Program's Strategy for Protecting and Restoring the Chesapeake Bay Watershed (2010) was developed in response to Executive Order, 13508 Chesapeake Bay Protection and Restoration. This Executive Order called for protecting an additional 2 million acres and adding 300 public access sites by 2025. The CCP initially emerged to lead efforts to achieve goals for land conservation and public access but has

since broadened its goals to include additional conservation and restoration priorities and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice. This coalition includes the USFWS, state agencies and more than 50 organizations and agencies engaged in land conservation, habitat restoration, outdoor recreation access, and related work. Incorporating important elements of the Nature's Network and Landscape Chesapeake science and decision-support tools, the CCP's Chesapeake Conservation Atlas maps existing resources related to long-term conservation goals for farms, forests, habitat, heritage, and human health.

## Science to Support Collaboration

Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC) is an adaptive management framework that informs decisions about where and how to expend resources to achieve key conservation outcomes in identified priority areas or regions of biological importance—often referred to as landscapes. SHC is the name for a conservation approach used by USFWS, many states, and partners. The USFWS has already applied SHC successfully in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. On the Delmarva Peninsula, the USFWS leads the Delmarva Restoration and Conservation Network, a group of partners working to restore and conserve Delmarva's landscapes. A similar partnership led by the USFWS, the Upper Susquehanna Conservation Alliance, operates on the Upper Susquehanna River in New York.

The Program, through engagement with the CCP, will serve as a forum for organizations to collaborate and prioritize science needs and conservation activities that align with watershed-wide conservation and restoration efforts. The CCP's Chesapeake Conservation Atlas provides a starting point to identify and develop shared biological, ecological, and societal outcomes that reflect current and potential restored and conserved conditions of the natural lands, waters and resources as called for by Public Law No: 116-188. The Chesapeake Conservation Atlas developed shared goals using a watershed conservation design that can guide decisions by this partnership. Watershed conservation design is a process for collaboratively agreeing on goals and measurable objectives for a geographic area and integrating information, maps, and tools to prioritize where partners can focus conservation actions with willing partners and landowners to achieve

objectives. Various conservation actions including ecological restoration, habitat management, various forms of community engagement, and more, are then identified to help achieve the vision. Using the products available from the conservation design process, the Program can develop a broad, watershed-wide operations plan that will allow conservation and restoration partners to align efforts with one another to achieve shared goals.

The Program's operations plan will provide a mechanism to guide collective conservation actions locally and at larger scales, achieving more than what individual organizations could achieve alone. The end result will be measurable gains for fish and wildlife conservation, clean water, access to outdoor recreation, and other values and natural and economic benefits for people living in the watershed.

## **Program Framework**

As described in the Act, the Program Framework is organized around five pillars that will inform the focus of Chesapeake Wild projects.

We describe each pillar below in terms of goals to support the achievement of the overall purpose and intent of the Act. The priorities within the pillars align with and/or complement the efforts of the CCP and existing partner organizations expected to support the program partnership.

We selected these pillars because of their unique role in attaining Chesapeake WILD goals; however, there is overlap among and across them. Therefore, a project that primarily focuses on one pillar (i.e. Conserving and restoring fish and wildlife habitat, with emphasis on vulnerable species and habitats) may also have ancillary benefits to water quality improvements, improving resiliency to flooding, and providing increased recreational opportunities. The program should support projects that can address as many pillars as possible as well as encourage ways to increase a project's ability to address several pillars coincidentally. This Framework and the envisioned operations plan to be developed through the Program do not supersede any mandates or authorities that partners may have to manage resources in the watershed but provides an outline to identify areas for alignment of effort and resources of different organizations. Partners may affiliate or support one or more pillars identified in the framework.

The intent of the Program is to bring together various stakeholders to create a forum for sharing experience and expertise aimed toward addressing all of the different pillars, building networks, and leading to greater efficiency and focus on a watershed-wide scale.

### **Pillar 1: Sustain and enhance restoration and protection activities by putting in place a resilient network of fish and wildlife habitats and connecting corridors, with emphasis on vulnerable species and habitats.**

The watershed has diverse habitats that support an array of fish and wildlife, ranging from densely forested headwater streams in the upper watershed to the estuary of the Chesapeake Bay. The program will work to conserve and restore ecological function to the important habitats that fish and wildlife depend on, with an emphasis on vulnerable and at-risk species and their habitat. Conservation and restoration of these habitats will result in ecological, recreational, and commercial benefits.

#### **Goals:**

- o Restore and sustain fish and wildlife populations through conservation and restoration of associated habitats, and corridors connecting them
- o Prioritize vulnerable and at-risk species, and native ecosystem restoration

#### **Priorities for Conservation Action and Design:**

- Remove barriers and constrictions in streams that impede fish passage
- Restore instream habitat and streambanks in degraded areas
- Adopt and address relevant priorities of the Bay Program Habitat, Sustainable Fisheries and Healthy Watersheds Goal Implementation Teams (GIT)
- Others?

### **Pillar 2: Address climate change by improving strategic planning, increasing scientific capacity to support that planning, monitoring, and applied science activities necessary to ensure resilience of natural ecosystems and habitats in the face of climate change and land use development.**

More than just conserving existing natural resources and systems, projects should focus on increasing their resilience to changing climate conditions. Greater coordination can improve scientific capacity, reduce duplication of efforts, and identify gaps where

additional capacity is needed. Improving existing monitoring and identifying new priority monitoring programs will also assist in measuring project-related outcomes that conserve and restore our natural resources.

#### **Goals:**

- o Ensure important areas and habitats threatened by climate change and development are protected and restored
- o Increase coordination among partners in the basin to develop science resources to guide project planning, prioritize investments, and undertake joint implementation efforts to address mutual priorities
- o Provide technical assistance for project development and implementation across the partnership, and for measuring improvements to natural resources after project implementation.

#### **Priorities for Conservation Action and Design:**

- Identify, protect, and restore areas of unique habitats that may be threatened by changing climate conditions, with an emphasis on habitats that are important to species at risk
- Identify, protect, and restore important natural habitats that are negatively impacted by changing land use, with an emphasis on habitats that are important to species at risk
- Others?

### **Pillar 3: Increase capacity and support for coordinated restoration and protection activities in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, particularly in historically disadvantaged communities, through outreach, education, and civic engagement.**

Building a connected conservation constituency in the Chesapeake Bay requires engaging with ever-growing, ever-changing populations to ensure that Americans care about conservation. The Chesapeake Bay watershed is home to diverse communities with rich variation in culture, demographics and perspectives. Despite this diversity, federal, state, and non-profit environmental organizations have not adequately considered diversity, equity and inclusion in the work to restore the Bay and its watershed, leading to racial and economic disparities in where conservation and restoration programs are sited. Since 2014, partners in the watershed have been working to increase the diversity of people

providing input and making decisions related to watershed conservation and restoration. Efforts are also ongoing to intentionally incorporate equity, inclusion and justice in addition to diversity—known collectively as diversity, equity, inclusion and justice (DEIJ)—into priority restoration and conservation programs throughout the watershed. Applying a DEIJ lens to all conservation and restoration activities and decisions will enable all people in the watershed to share in the many benefits that the Bay and watershed provide. (Chesapeake Bay Program, Diversity Outcome Management Strategy 2015-2025, v.3).

#### **Goals:**

- o Embrace a community-centered model to deliver conservation value in and near where Americans live
- o Work to understand individual conservation issues as they affect the interests of local communities, and then deploy customized approaches to address these needs to help fish, wildlife and people

#### **Priorities for Conservation Action and Design:**

- Adopt and address relevant priorities of the Bay Program Fostering Chesapeake Stewardship GIT that support coordinated restoration and protection activities
- Adopt and address relevant priorities of the Bay Program Diversity Workgroup that support coordinated restoration and protection activities
- Focus on youth and higher education to engage diverse individuals and communities to foster an environmental ethic to nurture interest in environmental careers
- Others?

### **Pillar 4: Enhance recreational opportunities and public access with a strong emphasis on equitable access to nature, consistent with the ecological needs of fish and wildlife habitat.**

Time spent in nature is vital to human health and well-being. However, in highly developed urban environments, opportunities for individuals to connect with nature are often limited. Too often the ability to access parks, refuges, and other green space in urban communities is constrained by inadequate transportation options and/or physical or financial challenges. We must reduce these barriers to the greatest extent possible to make the protection and restoration of the Chesapeake Bay

relevant to urban communities. Because of its location in a densely populated part of the country, the Chesapeake Bay watershed offers easy access to outdoor recreational opportunities to millions of people. The watershed provides high-quality recreational experiences, including boating, hunting, fishing, hiking, biking, wildlife viewing, birding, and scenic touring, thus providing significant revenue to the basin. Millions of people rely on the natural resource services provided by the Chesapeake Bay watershed, including clean air and water, recreational, and commercial opportunities.

#### Goals:

- o Maintain and improve recreational opportunities that are compatible with the conservation of natural resources
- o Increase public awareness of the recreational, educational, and economic contributions made by the Chesapeake Bay and its ecosystems
- o Increase the sense of stewardship of natural resources by residents and visitors
- o Build a broader conservation base in diverse communities by ensuring that access to green space and environmental education is easily accessible to all people living and working in Chesapeake Bay communities regardless of transportation, physical, or financial limitations

#### Priorities for Conservation Action and Design:

- Prioritize the establishment, restoration, and protection of green space and natural areas within walking distance of underserved communities, consistent with the ecological needs of fish and wildlife habitat
- Work with diverse partners and stakeholders to create mutually beneficial transportation projects, consistent with the ecological

needs of fish and wildlife habitat. For example, collaborate with municipalities to create projects that result in a range of affordable transportation options for community members seeking to access green space

- Others?

#### **Pillar 5: Improve and sustain water quality, upgrade water management capability, and reduce flood damage, with an emphasis on green infrastructure and natural infrastructure to support fish and wildlife, habitats of fish and wildlife, and drinking water for people.**

Millions of people rely on the Chesapeake Bay tributaries for drinking water. The watershed also supports a diverse suite of fish and wildlife that depends on high-quality water. Historically, portions of the estuary suffered from water pollution as a result of rapid population growth and industrial activities in the watershed. Great strides have been made in improving water quality in the watershed since the establishment of the Chesapeake Bay Program in the 1980s but more work is needed to maintain and improve water quality for both people and wildlife. There are high demands on the water resources for the Chesapeake Bay watershed, ranging from municipal and industrial water supply to energy production and agricultural uses. Fish and wildlife also depend on water availability in the habitats where they live. Water resource management in the watershed is guided by the Bay Program and the goals of the Chesapeake Bay Agreement (especially the Chesapeake Bay TMDL) and by the participating state and federal agencies that regulate water uses to meet competing needs. The Program will coordinate with existing regulatory activities, but will focus on non-regulatory efforts to support the demands on the water resources of the basin and to enhance resiliency to potential drought and flood conditions.

#### Goals:

- o Protect and maintain water quality and quantity
- o Reduce flooding through projects and non-regulatory programs aimed at improving land and watershed management
- o Reduce pollutants that can impair water quality

#### Priorities for Conservation Action and Design:

- Reduce non-point source pollution including sedimentation from agricultural, municipal, and urban landscapes while supporting fish and wildlife, habitats of fish and wildlife, and drinking water for people
- Reduce nutrient inputs into the Chesapeake Bay and tributaries, while supporting fish and wildlife, habitats of fish and wildlife, and drinking water for people
- Others?

For information and to stay connected, please contact:

**Mike Slattery**  
410/573 4571 - (O)  
202/870 1072 - (C)  
[michael\\_slattery@fws.gov](mailto:michael_slattery@fws.gov)

**Genevieve LaRouche**  
410/573 4573 (O)  
202/341 5882 (C)  
[genevieve\\_larouche@fws.gov](mailto:genevieve_larouche@fws.gov)

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

