



March 24, 2021

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland:

Congratulations on your recent confirmation as Secretary of the Interior. The significance of and timing for your leadership could not be more important.

We write on behalf of the Chesapeake Conservation Partnership, a large landscape collaborative of more than eighty federal and state agencies, Tribes, land trusts, and other non-profit organizations. The Partnership fosters collaborative action to conserve and restore culturally and ecologically important landscapes to benefit people, economies and nature throughout the 64,000 square mile Chesapeake Bay watershed. We span parts of six states -- Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia -- and the District of Columbia.

We are eager to work with you and your team, particularly in helping advance President Biden's goal of conserving at least 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030 set out in his Executive Order on "Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad." We can offer valuable perspectives as your team, in consultation with the Secretary of Agriculture and Secretary of Commerce, prepares the report to the National Climate Task Force on steps to achieve that goal.

The Chesapeake Bay watershed includes a diversity of landscape types across its seven jurisdictions: tidal wetlands, vast acreage of farmland and forestland, large rivers and their watersheds, mountainous regions in the Appalachians, and major urban centers surrounded by growing suburbs. Our already diverse population of 18 million is projected to increase by 4 million by 2050.

The region represents all the major challenges and opportunities for achieving many of the objectives of the President's Executive Order. But, the Chesapeake also has unique advantages from our deep legacy of successful land conservation and our network of collaborative conservation. We provide an overview of that legacy and challenges ahead in [Marking Milestones: Progress in Conserving Land in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed](#).

Chesapeake Conservation Partnership members are meaningfully advancing work toward the President's 30 x 30 goal and related commitments to tackling the climate crisis and improving equity and environmental justice for underserved communities. As a model for profiling 30 x 30 work, the Chesapeake offers:

- *Visibility:* The Nation's Capital is the cornerstone of our region. The watershed's lands and waters can be visited by federal officials and members of Congress within less than a day's drive.

- *Significant Federal Land Ownership:* The region is home to 57 units of the National Park Service, 17 National Wildlife Refuges, 2 National Forests, and several federally designated heritage areas and trails. These assets provide prime opportunities for enhancing climate resiliency and biodiversity.
- *30 x 30 Success Story:* Over 22 percent (9.16 million acres) of valuable lands in the watershed have been permanently conserved. We are over 68 percent of the way to protecting an additional 2 million acres by 2025. With major state land conservation programs and enhanced partnerships and collaboration with Interior, Agriculture and other federal agencies, we will achieve our own goal of permanently conserving 30 percent of the watershed by 2030.
- *Coastal Communities:* The Executive Order calls special attention to mitigating the impacts of climate change by increasing coastal resiliency through protecting and restoring coastal ecosystems. We are active in this area. The Bay's 11,000 mile shoreline includes large low-lying coastal areas and communities. The US Geological Survey reports the Chesapeake region among the nation's most vulnerable to sea level rise.

The National Park Service Chesapeake Office has provided collaborative leadership and technical and financial assistance for the Partnership continuously since 2009. The whole Partnership has convened in Annual Meetings since that time; our Steering Committee meets quarterly, and working groups advance multiple initiatives. Further, we contribute to the decades-long collaboration to restore the watershed through the Chesapeake Bay Program.

This continuity of collaboration provides us perspectives which may be useful and important as your team develops the report to the National Climate Task Force. We offer these in the attached, more detailed description.

We look forward to working with you and your team as we seek to make the Chesapeake a model for achieving President Biden's 30 x 30 conservation goal.

Sincerely,

Members of the Chesapeake Conservation Partnership Steering Committee



Hedrick Belin
President
Potomac Conservancy



Joel Dunn
President and CEO
Chesapeake Conservancy



Brett Glymph
Executive Director
Virginia Outdoors Foundation



Kate Hackett
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Sharee Williamson
Associate General Counsel
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CC: Honorable Tom Vilsack, Secretary US Department of Agriculture
Honorable Gina Raimondo, Secretary US Department of Commerce

Attachment: "Perspectives on Achieving President Biden's 30 x 30 Conservation Goal."



ATTACHMENT

Perspectives on Achieving President Biden’s 30 x 30 Conservation Goal

This document offers perspectives from the Chesapeake Conservation Partnership’s landscape scale collaboration that may be useful in framing guidelines and steps for achieving President Biden’s 30 x 30 conservation goal set out in his Executive Order on “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad.”

Measuring Progress

In 2010, stimulated by President Obama’s Executive Order on “Protecting and Restoring the Chesapeake Bay Watershed,” Chesapeake land conservation partners set a goal of protecting an additional 2 million acres by 2025. This goal was subsequently adopted in the [Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement](#) of 2014, a landmark, multi-state, multi-partner accord which guides conservation and restoration efforts for the watershed.

To track progress toward this goal, the Partnership, through the U.S. Geological Service and the Chesapeake Bay Program, has continuously improved geospatial documentation of protected lands in the watershed. From the 2010 baseline, over 1.36 million additional acres have been protected (as of 2019) toward the 2 million acres, or [68% of the goal](#). In total, 9.16 million acres are permanently protected, 22% of the watershed.

The Partnership has found that nationwide datasets like the Protected Areas Database of the United States (PADUS) and the National Conservation Easement Database (NCED) do not fully capture all protected lands. In fact, our documentation has shown they may miss 20 percent of protected lands, principally through not capturing protected private properties.

The Chesapeake Bay Watershed Protected Lands Dataset has been updated biennially. However, the U.S. Geological Survey, National Park Service and the Chesapeake Conservancy, have tested, and are in the process of extending, improvements to accelerate and automate aspects of the methodology to provide more frequent updates in collaboration with the six states, the District, and other partners.

We would be pleased to share our experience with this as you set out mechanisms to measure progress toward the national 30 x 30 goal.

Collaboration

The “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad” Executive Order places an emphasis on collaboration. We have found this infinitely valuable. Our federal partners--the National Park Service, Environmental Protection Agency, Fish & Wildlife Service, Forest Service, US Geological Survey, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Bureau of Land Management, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Department of Defense--have provided a backbone of engagement and support. In particular, the National Park Service



Chesapeake Office has provided collaborative leadership and technical and financial assistance for the Partnership continuously since 2009.

This diversity of collaboration is exceeded by our state and non-governmental members, bringing together leaders from across the Chesapeake watershed, both rural and urban. Our Steering Committee meets quarterly, working groups advance specific initiatives, and the whole Partnership has convened in Annual Meetings since 2009.

All of this is in addition to the decades-long collaboration to restore the watershed through the Chesapeake Bay Program, to which we contribute.

This long-term commitment to the continuity of collaboration has fundamentally shaped our views on the topics that follow.

Inclusive Guidelines for Conservation

The Chesapeake watershed is a complex, layered landscape shaped by nature and culture over millennia.

From the start, the Partnership made a fundamental commitment to inclusivity in conservation: everyone's land conservation goals and priorities are important; the Partnership's landscape conservation goals must be inclusive of all partners' goals. We recognize that land is conserved for multiple reasons. Some people are motivated by history, others by scenery, recreation, wildlife, or sustaining agriculture or forestry. Here, in a multifaceted landscape we must value them all. The simple fact is that conserved land of almost any kind enhances resiliency.

The Partnership has adopted this principle in its analysis of conservation values through articulating long-term [conservation goals and milestones](#) and mapping them through the [Chesapeake Conservation Atlas](#). Organized around Farms, Forests, Habitat, Heritage, and Public Health--with climate resiliency a factor throughout--these goals and maps articulate the conservation vision for the future. Moreover, they formed the basis for the Partnership's formal embrace of a 30 x 30 goal in 2019.

We urge a similarly inclusive approach with guidelines to be articulated in the report to the National Climate Task Force.

Private Land Conservation

The protection of private lands through permanent conservation easements has been a fundamental component of Chesapeake watershed land protection for decades. Of the 9.16 million acres protected in the watershed, over 2.1 million acres (23%) are protected through conservation easements. The watershed has long had some of the most successful private land conservation programs and organizations in the nation, including: Virginia's Land Preservation Tax Credit and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation which holds over 800,000 acres in conservation easements; Pennsylvania's Agricultural Conservation Easement Purchase Program

which has protected 600,000 acres; Maryland’s Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation and its Rural Legacy Programs, which combined have conserved over 426,000 acres; and more. Throughout our watershed, regional and local land trusts use these and other programs to protect farm, forest, and habitat lands through conservation easements.

Year after year, the private landowner demand for conservation easement purchases significantly exceeds available funding in the watershed. This points to substantial opportunities for cost effective, job-sustaining expansion of private land protections while simultaneously implementing best management practices for carbon sequestration, biodiversity, and water quality. We wish to emphasize that the majority of lands conserved through easements are funded through state and local programs.

We urge you to support private land conservation, and expanded resources for it, as a core component of the nation’s 30 x 30 strategy.

Equity, Public Health, and Environmental Justice

Land conservation, while providing significant general public benefits, has not benefited all communities equally. Indigenous peoples in the Chesapeake watershed have been largely dispossessed of their ancestral homelands. In a number of cities in the watershed, access to parks and green space is significantly inequitable, a direct legacy of 20th century redlining and other discriminatory practices. These inequities are found in smaller communities as well.

The Partnership has a [Public Health goal](#) that brings together conservation, equity, access, and resiliency. We held a five-part series of Annual Meeting sessions with 96 partner organizations, agencies, Tribes, and other community-based nonprofits to frame an agenda to achieve this goal.

Out of this, several messages are clear:

- We must not measure progress to 30 x 30 solely by counting acres; there must be a valuation of the social and environmental capital of smaller, more highly priced properties that directly benefit significant numbers of underserved communities.
- Significant commitments of funding from multiple sources must be directed or redirected to underserved communities to provide climate, open space, greening, recreation, and public health benefits.
- Long-term commitments to community-based partnerships that cut through and across traditional silos are needed to address these long-ignored needs.

We are heartened by the President’s emphasis on addressing racial and other inequities through multiple executive orders. Many of our member organizations are already moving to help advance this work. We urge you to factor these needs into the 30 x 30 strategy.

Habitat and Climate Resiliency

The Chesapeake Bay is our nation’s largest estuary – with over 11,000 miles of tidal shoreline – and one of the most biologically productive bodies of water in the world. At a ratio of 14:1, the

Bay also has the highest land-to-water ratio of any coastal water body in the world. This means that land use in the watershed has a highly significant impact on Bay water quality.

Moreover, the watershed is central to sustaining wildlife and fish on a vast scale. Hundreds of fish species use the Bay, rivers and headwater streams for some portion of their life cycles. Many – such as shad, striped bass, brook trout and more – hold tremendous ecological, commercial, recreational, or cultural value. Hundreds of migratory bird species rely on the forests, wetlands and meadows of the watershed for food, resting spots or nesting. Millions of migrating ducks, geese and swans overwinter on the Chesapeake. Conserving the habitat that supports fish and wildlife is critical to sustaining recreation, tourism, commercial uses, and a broader ecosystem.

The Partnership has [mapped the lands](#) necessary for “protecting a network of large natural areas and corridors sufficient to allow nature to respond to a changing climate and land development and to support thriving populations of native wildlife, migratory birds, fish and plants and sustain at-risk species.”

Land conservation to protect habitat and biodiversity, support habitat migration in face of climate change, and help convert hardened and developed properties to more resilient open space is vital.

We recognize that much federal land conservation has been traditionally focused in the western United States. We urge that the national 30 x 30 strategy recognize the tremendous value and urgency of land conservation in the east, and particularly the Chesapeake watershed.

Financial Flows and Catalyzing Private Investment

Several sections of the “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad” Executive Order call for developing draft plans to reform financial flows and catalyze private investment in green recovery and nature based solutions that increase climate resilience, protect public health, and conserve lands and waters.

Our Partnership has developed [proposed legislation](#) pending now in the Maryland General Assembly designed to attract increased private capital investments in green and blue infrastructure, climate resiliency, conservation, and restoration including through ecosystem markets such as carbon offsets. Our plan is to assist other states in considering and enacting versions of this legislation in future years.

Federal Conservation Programs Key to Our Landscape Scale Work

We wish to note several federal conservation programs that are of particular importance to our landscape conservation work in the Chesapeake watershed:

Chesapeake Bay Initiative Act & Chesapeake Gateways: This relatively small National Park Service program continues to have outsized impact on collaborative conservation, public access, and telling the Chesapeake story. It provides the backbone of support for the Partnership.



Chesapeake Watershed Investments for Landscape Defense (WILD) Act: This recently enacted legislation holds significant promise for supporting wildlife habitat conservation and restoration, advancing climate resiliency, public access, and equity, through the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS).

Land & Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): Like the entire nation, the Chesapeake benefits from LWCF in multiple ways. We would like to draw your attention to one aspect of LWCF that formerly proved extremely successful and which we would like to see restored.

From 2013 to 2017, the LWCF Landscape Conservation Collaborative initiative encouraged conservation partnerships from around the nation to propose packages of coordinated requests across the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, US Fish & Wildlife Service and USDA Forest Service. The Chesapeake Conservation Partnership coordinated the Rivers of the Chesapeake LWCF Collaborative, successfully bringing over \$35 million to the watershed for land protection. This has conserved highly significant properties, several of which protect ancestral homelands of Indigenous Peoples, including: the internationally recognized site of Powhatan's chiefdom at [Werowocomoco](#) as a National Park Service site; and Fone's Cliffs along the Rappahannock River.

We hope the 30 x 30 strategy will bring the return of a LWCF Collaborative model with new improvements based on past experience and current needs.

USDA Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP): This program to protect and enhance wetlands, grasslands, and working farms through conservation easements is often matched with significant state farmland preservation funds, leveraging each.

DOD's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program (REPI): This DOD program to combat encroachments limiting military training, testing, and operations provides major land conservation benefits in the Chesapeake, due to our many military installations.

Civilian Climate Corps

The "Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad" Executive Order's call for a strategy to create a Civilian Climate Corps is timely and needed. In developing the strategy, we encourage the inclusion of matching grants to states, local governments, and non-governmental organizations. Several of our member states have well established and effective conservation corps programs engaged in many of the hands-on activities listed in the order. In addition, a [Chesapeake Conservation Corps](#) supports these activities with dozens of organizations in the watershed.