

Meeting Minutes

TAC Stream Protection & Forestry Subcommittee – 2nd Meeting

September 10, 2025

Smith East Room, Augusta County Government Center

18 Government Center Lane, Verona, VA 24482 - (540) 248-5600

Attendees:

TAC Subcommittee Member	Organization	Voting
Ben Chester	Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) (Chair)	Yes
Bryan Hofmann	Friends of the Rappahannock	Yes
Chris Barbour	Skyline SWCD	Yes
Keith Burgess (Proxy)	Monacan SWCD	Yes
Eric Heberling	Headwaters SWCD	Yes
Ann Marie Roberts	James River Association	Yes
Madison Coffey	Lord Fairfax SWCD	Yes
Jack Carlton	Shenandoah Valley SWCD	Yes
Patti Nylander (Proxy)	Virginia Department of Forestry	Yes
Kevin Dunn	Piedmont SWCD	Yes
Mark Campbell	Virginia Farm Bureau	Yes
Matt Kowalski	Chesapeake Bay Foundation	Yes
Robert Bradford	Culpeper SWCD	Yes
Micheal Tabor (Proxy)	Blue Ridge SWCD	Yes
Abigail Ainsley (Proxy)	Hanover-Caroline SWCD	Yes
Tim Higgs	Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS)	Yes
Proxies Present		
Chanz Hopkins	Skyline SWCD	No
Aaron Shull	Headwaters SWCD	No
Ben Loyd	Lord Fairfax SWCD	No
Others Present		
Andrew Smith	DCR	No
Jason Wilfong	DCR	No
Tracy Culbertson	DCR	No
Wheeler Wood	VCU L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs	No
Jason Burkett	VCU L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs	No
Hunter Gravatt	Hanover-Caroline SWCD	No

Voting Members Present: 16

Introductions

Ben Chester (DCR) called the meeting to order at 9:33 with a quorum of 16 voting members present. He invited everyone in the room to introduce themselves and sign the sign-in sheet. The ground rules of the TAC subcommittee were stated: advance, amend, table or

defer. Mr. Chester asked if there were any comments on the draft minutes from the first Forestry and Stream Protection subcommittee meeting which were sent out via email on 9/8/2025. There were no comments.

Mr. Chester reviewed the matrix items which were addressed in the first meeting. Items 16S, 15S, 14S, 13S, 12S, 11S and 10S were all tabled. Item 9Sa was moved to the Cover Crop Subcommittee and a literature review for 9Sb was requested. Item 7S was tabled. 6S was deferred pending results of the Riparian Forest Buffer Maintenance RFP and a change in the language in the FR-3 practice specification to include establishment and maintenance. Item 2S was also addressed in the first meeting.

New Business

Mr. Chester asked the group for suggestions on how to begin addressing the remaining matrix items. Two options were discussed – address the forestry items all as one up front or address the unfinished business of 9Sb and 8S first as they may require more detailed discussion. Based on a show of hands, all preferred to address the unfinished business of 9Sb and 8S first.

Matrix Item 9Sb: *Field border practices including a continuing CCI payment for less than 35' field borders to prevent runoff into ditches and provide travel lanes for equipment on fields*

Wheeler Wood introduced himself and Jason Burkett and reminded the group that they are here to facilitate the conversation and guide the process. He asked that members raise their hands to be called upon to speak and to limit side conversations.

Ben Chester called upon Hunter Gravatt to discuss the findings of the literature review for item 9Sb. Mr. Gravatt stated that Sharon Conner compiled the review with data from DEQ and DOF and summarized the review by stating field borders and ditch practices can capture nutrients on parts of fields where crops are not as productive. Mr. Chester apologized for not sending out the literature review with the agenda. It was requested that Mr. Chester read the literature review in full to the group and he proceeded to do so.

In discussion, concerns were raised about maintenance, vegetation species, proximity to perennial waterways, water quality benefit and whether agricultural equipment use on field borders should be permissible. The similarity of the proposed practice to the NRCS practices 386 Field Border and 393 Filter Strip were discussed as a potential reference to creation of a field border practice. The SL-1 VACS practice was also discussed and there seemed to be confusion between members as to whether this practice can be used for installing field borders and whether it's incentive payment could be interpreted as use for future maintenance. **Keith Burgess made the motion to defer Matrix Item 9Sb until Hanover Caroline SWCD can develop a practice specification. Madison Coffey**

seconded. Open to discussion, Hunter Gravatt asked if the motion was to develop a practice specification or a CCI specification. Keith Burgess specified both. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Matrix Item 8S: *Permanent Long-term shade practice (trees)- The majority of the shade on many farms is along the stream which is a major reason why farmers do not sign up for the program because their cattle lose access to shade. We propose a practice similar to the FR-1 specifically designed for cattle shade with a cost share rate of 75%. Time must be given for the trees to establish and fast growing trees native to Virginia should be prioritized.*

Mr. Chester gave some background to this matrix item as it has come up a number of times throughout the years. It was explained that it is up to District staff to inform participants of the pros and cons of implementing a stream exclusion practice which should include consideration to loss of shade. The SL-6N practice, with a smaller buffer width, could provide more shade along riparian areas. The SL-6W, with larger buffer widths, offers the incentive payment which participants could use towards providing shade in their own manner. Shade structures were looked at in the past, but NRCS does not have a practice for it nor a standard for reference in the engineering of such a structure. This is why the wide width buffer practice includes an incentive payment, for producers to provide shade in a way that works for them where it is not under a lifespan and no cost share would be required to be paid back if failure occurs. There are many factors to address when we consider a practice using trees to provide livestock shade. Discussion amongst the group was held including the use of the NRCS silvopasture practice specification for reference in creating a VACS silvopasture specification and Bryan Hofmann elaborated on the USDA Trees for Shade pilot program which has been implemented in several counties with assistance from local SWCDs (Thomas Jefferson, Hanover Caroline and John Marshall). **Matt Kowalski made the motion to defer matrix item 8S until a written specification can be drafted and brought back to the group for review. This motion included the request to have Bryan Hofmann and his organization work with DOF to review the existing NRCS silvopasture specification to aid in drafting a VACS practice specification. Keith Burgess seconded the motion.**

The floor was open for discussion. The similarity of a silvopasture practice to the FR-1 practice was discussed in relation to whether it would be considered a land use conversion. Bryan Hoffman explained that afforestation in the Bay model is credited differently than tree establishment and silvopasture would not be defined as afforestation. Patti Nylander explained that silvopasture would not work under the FR-1 because it would not be considered a land use change to forestland. It's still pasture and would require fencing, which is not an eligible component under the FR-1. Jason Wilfong reiterated this by stating the fact that grazing livestock is not permitted under the FR-1 practice. It was further discussed and clarified that a silvopasture practice would be a standalone practice not to

be tied previously or concurrently to a stream exclusion practice but would instead be a standalone practice with a grazing management plan requirement. **Matt Kowalski clarified his motion to defer matrix item 8S until a standalone silvopasture practice specification, not associated with a stream exclusion practice, can be drafted and presented to the group. Madison Coffey seconded. Final discussion was held to take credit in the Bay model into consideration before establishing a silvopasture practice which is intended to provide shade. It was clarified that the creation of this practice will be spearheaded by Bryan Hofmann. The motion passed unanimously.**

Matrix Item 5S: *Develop a new Practice FR 3-W - Forest Riparian Buffer (Wide)*

- Establish a FR3-W to aggressively encourage wider and better riparian buffer zones.
- Allow buffers from 100 feet to 400 feet wide.
- Maintain existing 95% financial assistance for eligible components.
- Establish incentive payments as follows:

- i. Conifer Buffers: \$10,000. per acre for a 20-year lifespan
- ii. Hardwood Buffers: \$12,500 per acre for a 20-year lifespan

Justification: For decades now, all of the emphasis has been on establishing minimum amounts in terms of size, length, or acreage of many BMPs used in water quality improvement work. Forest Riparian Buffers have been proven through scientific research to provide far greater on-site and off-site benefits the wider they are. Minimum width buffers may or may not provide filter action of suspended sediments depending on the site. Wider buffers do a much greater job in trapping suspended sediment. In addition, research has shown a wider living forest on these riparian sites can be extremely effective in removing dissolved nutrients from shallow ground water passing through the root zones of these wide buffers. Narrow buffers have been plagued with problems due to periodic flooding, debris trapping, and stream scouring and erosion. The wider the buffer, the better on-site and downstream flood damage mitigation benefits occur. These are all goals of the Commonwealth's total Chesapeake Bay Program effort, yet the opportunity to maximize these benefits is ignored. "Wider is better" is scientifically proven and is sometime we should be striving to achieve. The presence of a viable living thriving forest in a riparian zone is one of the best things that can be done for water quality improvement.

Due to the similarity of matrix item 5S to 1S, 3S and 4S, the group came to the consensus that suggestions within 5S could be addressed with the remaining matrix items. **Matt Kowalski made a motion to table 5S. Micheal Tabor seconded. The motion passed unanimously.**

Matrix Item 1S: *Multiple suggestions regarding FR-3 planting width:*

- a. FR-3- "The entire flood plain is eligible for planting, not to exceed 100 feet." Remove the "not to exceed 100 feet.", if a producer is willing to plant an entire flood plain it should be eligible for cost-share no matter the width as long as trees are being planted in a legitimate flood plain. The Buffer Payment could remain the same but cost-share and incentive would be issued to all acres.
- b. Remove 100' from stream planting requirement from FR-3 and allow FR-3 to cover plantings up to 300' from stream. Many buffer plantings go over 100' in width and farmers are penalized for creating larger buffers by having to switch to an FR-1 at 100' plus. Buffer payments and buffer reporting do not stop at 100' and the buffer planting practice should be consistent regardless of program. The FR-3 should not be limited to 100' as it limits adoption of larger buffers.
- c. Years of scientific research* indicate that wider vegetated buffers not only filter out more pollutants from overland runoff, but also allow for more absorption, processing, and removal of nutrients before water makes its way to a stream. Additionally, research shows* that a buffer of 150' is needed to support a healthy natural stream ecosystem.*citations available upon request We therefore suggest that the BMP manual be changed so that the FR-3 practice be eligible for the width of 150 feet from the top of bank (increased from 100').
- d. FR-3 should not be limited to 35 ft. Participants who do a narrower exclusion option or who have previously excluded water features on their own at a narrower setback should still be able to qualify for an FR-3. As long as VA DOF can approve this in

their plan. "10. The width of the wooded buffer will be a minimum of 35 feet from the edge of the stream bank. The entire flood plain is eligible for planting, not to exceed 100 feet."

Matrix item 1Sa was approached first where the definition of "entire floodplain" was brought into question and how "floodplain" is defined. Mr. Chester made the suggestion to define the 100 year floodplain using FEMA FIRM maps. In instances where FEMA FIRM maps are not available, the option of having the floodplain professionally delineated was suggested by Mr. Chester. Discussion on item 1Sb commenced with Madison Coffey suggesting increasing the area eligible for planting from 100 ft. to 300 ft. to remain consistent with partner agencies (DOF and the CBF).

Bryan Hofmann made the motion to table 1Sd. Ann Marie Roberts seconded the motion. In discussion, Kevin Dunn clarified that the FR-1 can be used for tree planting in buffer widths less than 35 feet. **Motion passes unanimously.**

Matt Kowalski made the motion to add language to the FR-3 specification that states the entire floodplain, or a maximum width of 300 ft. is eligible for cost share. Madison Coffey seconded. After discussion, Mr. Kowalski amended his motion to include how the floodplain is defined. Mr. Chester suggested to address matrix item 2S in conjunction with the language change suggested to address items 1Sa, 1Sb and 1Sc in an attempt to complete all items on the agenda. After discussion, the suggested change of language in the FR-3 specification, section B. number 10. was presented as:

"The width of the ~~wooded~~ forested buffer will be a minimum of 35 feet from the edge of the stream bank. The entire flood plain is eligible for planting or maximum of 300 feet. Eligible floodplain width may be determined by the 100 year floodplain based on FEMA Flood Insurance Rate Maps or a delineation completed by a licensed professional verified by DCR. If a flood plain is not delineated, the eligible width shall not exceed 300 feet., not to exceed 100 feet."

The motion presented by Mr. Kowalski was voted upon. The motion was passed (14Y) with one opposed (Higgs) and one abstained (Chester).

It was agreed that the meeting would commence without breaking for lunch and the group instead broke for 15 minutes.

Mr. Chester reconvened the meeting at 12:09 with 16 voting members in attendance.

Matrix Item 3S: *Modify the current FR-3 rates*

· Maintain the 95% payment rate for eligible costs in items C.1. and C.2.

· Increase C. 1. (i) rates to: Conifer buffers - \$3,000 for a 10-year lifespan/ \$5,000 for a 15-year lifespan

· Increase C. 1. (ii) rate to: Hardwood buffers - \$7,500 for a 10-year lifespan/ \$10,000 for a 15-year lifespan

Justification: Incentive payments have not kept up with rising land values and no long serve as a true incentive for adoption. This type of practice necessitates a producer to remove acreage from production, whether it be cropland, hay land or pasture land. Higher rates of incentive need to be a driving point to encourage producers to make this land use change and receive adequate fair market value for the

land they are converting. The VDOF effort targeted this as a key item needing attention for additional action.

· Add language "By Accepting either cost share payment or a state tax credit for this practice, the participant agrees to preserve this area and all practice components of the specified lifespan. Additional financial assistance is available to help producers with the cost of maintaining proper tree growth and viability. All other maintenance components on the practice (fence, etc.) are the responsibility of the participant

· Drop C. 3.

Justification: An incentive payment is included in item C-1. Additional payments are listed in item C.3. This is confusing and bothersome for producers trying to understand the program, what they may be eligible and what their financial assistance might be. In addition, this double figuring is burdensome for staff to calculate and then explain why there are various components to the final amount. Combining all of incentive payments into one amount is easier to understand and will improve marketing effectiveness and efficiency.

Wheeler Wood asked whether the organization that submitted this suggestion was present and willing to clarify. With no one coming forward, discussion was held amongst the group. Bryan Hofmann speculated that the intent of the first section of 3S, which includes points C. 1. (i) and (ii) was an increase in payment to incorporate maintenance costs which he stated, in his experience, is approximately \$3,000 to \$5,000 per acre over a 3 year period. Mr. Chester raised concerns that the increase in rates is significant enough to create an avenue for misuse. He stated that it was less costly to the State and more beneficial to water quality to place a property under an easement. Kevin Dunn touched on the fact that the rates were raised two years ago and asked if there was any data to show that this increase in rates encouraged more participation. Mr. Chester presented data to the group, compiled by Sara Bottenfield, that showed participation in the FR-3 between PY 2020 and PY 2025 has remained mostly unchanged. He also touched on the fact that there is financial assistance currently available from other agency programs (RFP) that can help with maintenance expenses.

Kevin Dunn made a motion to table the first section of matrix item 3S that suggested a modification of rates. Micheal Tabor seconded the motion. Mr. Chester clarified that the motion on the floor is to table section 3S on rates as it pertains to C. 1. (i) and (ii). The motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Chester moved on to the remaining 3S suggestions which are the language change and the dropping of C3. **Bryan Hofmann made a motion to table "Drop C3". Matt Kowalski seconded the motion. With no discussion, the motion passed unanimously.**

Mr. Chester read the second section of 3S to the group concerning the language change. **Micheal Tabor made the motion to table this suggestion. Bryan Hofmann seconded the motion.** During discussion, Mr. Hofmann stated that it should be incumbent for all third parties to make their availability for assistance known to Districts who should then in turn be communicating this to their participants. **With no further discussion, the motion passes unanimously.**

Matrix Item 4S: *Our experience implementing riparian forested buffer (RFB) projects has demonstrated that simplified payment strategies not only make it easier to administer, but simple payment strategies also make it easier to recruit participants. RFBs are easily*

one of the most cost-effective BMPs to improve water quality. And there is a broad recognition that Virginia needs to find ways to accelerate implementation of effective agricultural BMPs.

We therefore suggest that the BMP Manual be changed so that the FR-3 practice offers 90% cost-share for pine plantings, and 100% cost-share for mixed hardwood tree plantings; eliminate the incentive payments and different rates dependent on contract length (no change to the \$80/acre bonus under C.3). We believe changing the payment strategy to be straightforward (a percentage-based payment without the necessary calculations for contract length) will reduce confusion and increase recruitment of participants.

Kevin Dunn made a motion to table matrix item 4S. Micheal Tabor seconded the motion. During discussion Bryan Hofmann encouraged partner agencies to submit their own recommendations in an effort to further simplify the FR-3 from a participant perspective. Matt Kowalski stated that his agency submitted this suggestion before the language change in the specification was changed to “maintenance and establishment payment”. He agreed with Mr. Hofmann’s suggestion that the specification should be further simplified to make it’s explanation clearer to participants.

The motion as presented by Mr. Dunn and seconded by Mr. Tabor passed unanimously.

Matrix Item 17S: *Add WP-2A Streambank Stabilization to the list of variance-eligible practices.*

Mr. Chester informed the group that a late submission had been received and asked members if they would like to consider this submission at this time. The group concurred. Madison Coffey proceeded with a brief synopsis of the submission suggesting the WP-2A practice become eligible for a variance. **Robert Bradford made a motion to add the WP-2A Streambank Stabilization be eligible for a variance. Bryan Hofmann seconded the motion.**

During discussion the argument was made that you could split a streambank stabilization project up on a field by field basis to reduce the need for a variance with Mr. Hofmann stating the issue could be exacerbated by the shifting of the erosion to the next section. Keith Burgess expressed concerns about cost, potential failure and where the funds to pay for repair would come from. Kevin Dunn argued that streambank erosion is not caused by agricultural activity and the cost to the state is currently so great that’s it’s hard to justify allowing a variance. Mr. Chester stated that the goal is to stop soil loss, not loss of potential farmland. He made the argument that 90% cost share for larger projects is a significant amount of money and having some out of pocket expense is a good thing.

As the discussion concluded, Tim Higgs asked that the motion be restated. Mr. Chester stated the motion on the floor is to approve adding a variance to the WP-2A practice (Bradford). Mr. Hofmann seconded (again). **The motion was voted upon and passed (14Y) with one opposed (Dunn) and one abstained (Chester).**

Public Comment

Mr. Chester opened the public comment period. There was no public comment.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:04pm.

Attachment: Literature Review

Grass Interface Zones (AKA field borders)

Several requests have come into our District from producers and a directors in past years relating to adding grass interface zones/field borders and their maintenance as VACS practices. Field borders are strips of permanent vegetation established at the edge or around the perimeter of a field. NRCS does have a field border practice at a width of 35 feet. While NRCS has funds for installation, it rarely pays for operations and maintenance. Once it's installed, maintenance/land rental payments are on the landowner or producer.

This TAC #7 suggestion advocates for a field border practice that would pay on grass areas less than 35 feet, meaning narrow borders between 10 feet and 35 feet. It also advocates for maintenance of existing field borders as a CCI practice.

**This BMP may be accomplished as part of the Cover Crop Sub-Committee Matrix Recommendation 1C for CCI-SL1. Does the conversion have to take place initially as part of an SL-1 to qualify for maintenance?

Current Buffer Practices

Under the current representation of riparian buffers, a buffer is a newly established area along a stream, on average 100 feet-wide, of either grass or trees, and is managed to maintain the integrity of stream channels and shorelines and reduce the impacts of upstream land uses. Both grass and forest buffers that are at least 35' wide receive credit.

Installation and Maintenance of Grass Interface Zones/Field Borders

Riparian forest buffers benefit from having a grass interface upslope. Namely, the grass interface can help induce uniform flow and prevent channelization across the buffer. However, this is dependent on the nature of the flow (e.g., slope, soils, amount of precipitation, etc.). The U.S. Forest Service's Riparian Forest Buffers Function and Design for Protection and Enhancement of Water Resources holds the best performing buffers include a 3-zone design which combines the benefits of both forest and grass. The outer grass interface zone acts to slow and spread the flow uniformly to deter concentrated flows through the buffer. This prevents gullies in the buffer.

It is also common to see head-cutting along field edges where there is no grass border between crop field and forest buffer.



We see much less of this where grass field borders are installed. Grass can provide dense protection of soil surfaces. Field borders also allow for vehicle traffic, preventing rutting and compaction in fields, which inhibit upland infiltration.



A field border would help to induce uniform flow in the buffer thus preventing edge of field erosion (head-cutting) and allowing for infiltration.

Importance of grass borders important on field, irrigation and roadside ditches

Ditches are exempt from regulation under the Federal Farm Bill and the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act. They do not require buffers. Maintenance is allowed on ditches to ensure proper flow. However, many field drainage ditches, irrigation ditches, or roadside ditches outlet to wetlands and streams.



Grass borders (less than 35') could benefit these drainage ditches. Since we know that riparian buffers treat flow laden with nutrients (e.g., from cropland) and will improve water quality, the same should hold true for grass borders on ditches. Since narrow buffer practices have been allowed in VACS, the same should hold true for those along ditches.

Why should grass interface zones/AKA field borders be incentivized?

Agricultural Land in Virginia is mostly rented land. In the eastern part of Virginia, the proximity to water for irrigation and highly productive soils means that land is cropped to the edge of roads/roadside ditches, irrigation ditches and wooded buffers due to high rent prices. Land rent in Eastern VA ranges from \$68/acre on non-irrigated cropland to \$200/acre on irrigated land (VCE Hanover). As such, there is no incentive for farmers to install and maintain field borders. It is the regulatory requirement in the eastern part of Virginia, spelled out in the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act, that ensures the minimum 25' riparian buffer on perennial waterways (this is known as the CBPA Ag Exemption, which allows the reduction to 25') is maintained.

Incentives provided on a yearly (CCI) or contractual basis would encourage farmer installation and maintenance of grass interface zones between wooded buffers, irrigation ditches and roadside ditches and the cropland.