

DCR Forest Buffer Workgroup - Meeting Minutes

3/28/2025

Brite Transit Facility, Fishersville VA

10:00AM-3:00PM

Attendees:

Sara Bottenfield	DCR
Ben Chester	DCR
Christine Watlington-Jones	DCR
Matt Kowalski	Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Matt Carroll	TJ SWCD
Mark Campbell	Farm Bureau / Director TJ SWCD
Amber Ellis	James River Association
Caitlin Verdu	DOF
Teagan O'Brien	DOF
Gary Boring	New River SWCD Director
Bryan Hofmann	Friends of the Rappahannock
Patti Nylander	DOF

- Sara Bottenfield called the meeting to order at 10:13.
- Sara recapped the last meeting and laid out the plan for today to continue discussing the RFP for the buffer grant funding that DCR plans to offer in the near future.
- Christine Watlington-Jones added that the funding (\$2M) is limited to maintenance of buffers for ag land. No geographical limitations or time limit to spend the funds.
- Sara quoted the DCR description of "agricultural land" for VACS eligibility.
- Eligibility was discussed as to whether it was beneficial to link RFP eligibility to VACS eligibility or not, but the least restriction possible would be ideal (Amber Ellis).
- Amber asked how to get future funding included in the general assembly budget.
- Christine recommended bringing the request to the Secretaries of Ag and Forestry and Natural Resources.
- It could be beneficial to try to get any future funding to not be specific to Ag for greater eligibility.
- Bryan Hofmann brought up the question of how do we identify/capture these buffers for maintenance needs after their contract lifespan? Do we do a voluntary sign up?
- Matt Carroll stated that the CREP reenrollment may be a good starting point.
- Ben Chester asked if a ranking or point system would be used to determine which projects would get the funding, like a prioritization?
- Matt Kowalski stated it may be better to prioritize new buffers vs. older buffers.
- Patti Nylander stated that individual buffers may need more or less funds depending on the site and the age/stage of the buffer.
- Sara suggested that the RFP could treat early buffer maintenance and older buffer maintenance as different activities, though both would be eligible for funding.
- Gary Boring asked what the cost per acre for maintenance is?
- Bryan estimated \$1600-2000/acre potentially based on 150 or so acres per year.
- Matt Kowalski said he could get the numbers from CBF's records as well.
- Amber stated that \$560 + \$350 + \$70 = around \$1000 per acre.

- Gary stated that at \$1000 per acre, \$2M will only cover 2000 acres.
- Matt Carroll stated that the VACS funding for buffers is great but doesn't have the maintenance which makes a big difference.
- Caitlin stated that it can be difficult to determine eligibility and crediting for existing buffers.
- Amber stated that they have a lot of data they can use to decide the priorities etc.
- Sara asked if the group thought the RFP should specify the proportion of new buffers vs. old buffers to be funded. Consensus was to prioritize newer buffers but without setting a limit on old vs. new.
- Ben Chester asked if the target is for individuals to apply or districts or agencies or NGOs or anything like that? Not individuals, applicants would be agencies, NGOs, etc.
- RFFL requests go through a central application portal that is then sent out regionally.
- Matt Carroll stated that he gets the local forester to put together the future maintenance plans.
- Suggestion would be to provide maintenance options as part of the end of an FR-3 installation.
- Could we do a Survey123 application? Bryan stated that a QR or other simple sign up would be best.
- Discussion about creating a form or process for all applicants vs. allowing the applicants to show their plan for applications/marketing etc. and decided the less requirements from DCR the better.
- Sara asked about geographic area and potential pros and cons with regional contracts, etc.
- Patti stated that RFFL used watershed-level areas and that Southern rivers did not get applicants.
- Consensus was to avoid specific requirements for geographic areas and leave it to applicants to work out coordination and coverage of geographic areas.
- How will the RFP define the limits of 'buffer'? RFFL and NRCS are 300'.
- Caitlyn stated that RFFL is difficult to implement and requires a full-time staff person to manage it. Attempting to recreate RFFL through this RFP would not be a good idea.
- The funding offered through this RFP can be used towards staff time and training. Some discussion of whether the RFP should establish a cap, maybe as a percentage of the award?
- Sara asked about establishing minimum/maximum funding request or match requirements in the RFP.
- How do we incorporate match into reviewing and ranking applications?
- Discussion that "match" can be manufactured and a match requirement may hurt those who don't find a way to say it. Consensus that match should not be required but may be considered for additional points in scoring.
- Christine stated we want to see in the application their proven ability to make the projects work.
- Can there be additional money to areas currently underserved?
- Sara asked what the reasonable time frame would be to spend the money.
- Matt Kowalski and Bryan agreed that a 2-year enrollment period and 3-year maintenance cycle will take 5 years to implement. It is important to determine if we are talking about new or old buffers as that will impact the timeline.
- Sara asked what other aspects of an RFP we need to address:
  - Reporting – Typical quarterly with a more detailed annual report
    - Site locations and acreage
    - Ensuring all buffers have been reported via cost-share program, DOF, BMP Warehouse, etc.
  - Reimbursement – also quarterly?
    - Amber asked how would DCR want the reporting for the projects, expenditures per site or combined, staff hours/timesheets, cost as rate per acre instead of hours?
  - Establish expectation for maintenance standard – necessary requirements and to what level (NRCS 391 standard?). Different standard for new or old buffers? Suggested that the standard be 70% coverage.

- Break for lunch 12:15-1:08PM
- Sara brought the meeting back to order and provided a recap of the main takeaways from the RFP discussion.
- Sara transitioned the conversation to a TAC suggestion that has been submitted several times-addressing the loss of shade due to exclusion practices. Suggestions have included both shade structures and trees, which have not been advanced by the TAC.
- Sara stated her understanding is that Virginia NRCS piloted portable shade structures several years ago and opted not to adopt the standard.
- Bryan mentioned Trees for Graziers which has a program that works within NRCS standards. The Rappahannock River Roundtable is offering a Trees for Shade program, however the federal funding supporting it has been frozen. One of four projects is continuing.
- Distributed shade is better and becomes a silvopasture.
- Bryan shared a draft list that compiles current funding opportunities for agroforestry in Virginia.
- Discussed that the amount of trees and type will make a big difference in establishing a silvopasture and how to make it work. Planting little trees vs established trees is tough too.
- Bryan stated the expectation was about \$3k an acre to establish and may include extension of watering systems, etc.
- Maintenance is minimal but still necessary and needs to be checked annually.
- Sara suggested that VACS buffer payments could be used towards a shade solution.
- Bryan suggested using Trees for Clean Water and see how things go.
- Shade structures and their issues were discussed broadly.
- Sara discussed next steps and future topics. Much of the conversation from the first meeting about buffer maintenance, as well as about the topic of shade, has come back to VACS and ways that cost-share might be offered as a solution. DCR has an existing TAC to consider changes to VACS which is the appropriate forum for those suggestions and discussions. The TAC will begin meeting again this summer so for now, no additional meetings of this group will be scheduled.
- Christine Watlington noted that in considering where funding for buffer maintenance might come from, future levels of VACS funding are not guaranteed.
- Amber shared that the James River Consortium will host the statewide buffer summit on October 21 in Richmond. The summit and similar meetings might be a good opportunity for this group to reconvene and stay up to date on programs and developments.
- Sara opened the floor for public comments.
- Meeting adjourned at 2:40PM