

LANCASTER'S COMMON AGENDA FOR CLEAN WATER

White Paper | 2020 RCPP Proposal Summary



Photo by Will Parson/Chesapeake Bay Program



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Overview

The Lancaster Clean Water Partners (Partners), through the Conservation Foundation of Lancaster County, facilitated the submission of a project proposal on November 25, 2020, for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Sustainable restoration of priority streams and the acquisition of realistic, adequate funding are two key priorities of the Partners' Common Agenda. As one strategy for achieving those priorities, the RCPP proposal for \$10 million over three years brings together ten contributing partners – with total in-kind or cash contributions of \$13 million – in support of the Countywide Action Plan (CAP) and Common Agenda goal of clean and clear water by 2040.



Photo by Will Parson/Chesapeake Bay Program

The Partners brings together a diverse group of organizations including nonprofits, government agencies, and businesses who have a passion for collaborating with farmers to achieve water quality goals and farm economic sustainability, and a commitment to working to achieve a shared vision of clean and clear local water by 2040.

The Partners, through the Conservation Foundation of Lancaster County, was the official RCPP applicant. To fully embrace a collaborative approach, ten partner organizations came together to form a leadership team. The leadership team included the following organizations: TeamAg, Inc., Red Barn Consulting, Lancaster Farmland Trust, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Stroud Water Research Center, Lancaster County Conservation District, Chesapeake Conservancy, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, and Sustainable Chesapeake.

The Partners objectives are to reach the nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment reductions in the CAP by 2025; reduce County “impaired streams” by 350 miles by 2030; and to have 75% of county adults familiar, supportive, and engaged in clean water.

Delisting 350 Miles of Impaired Streams

Half of Lancaster County’s 1,400 miles of streams are listed as “impaired” by the Department of Environmental Protection, meaning that pollution has hindered their use for drinking water supplies, fishing, recreation, or the aquatic life that call the waterways home. In the past, Lancaster has approached cleaning up its streams opportunistically meaning working where landowners were willing, resulting in patchwork implementations. While the RCPP project includes all of Lancaster County and anyone can apply for a project, the Partners propose to focus on select catchments within the Chiques, Conestoga, Pequea, Octoraro watersheds to get multiple landowners with contiguous stretches of stream to implement conservation practices simultaneously, thereby setting the stage to begin delisting streams.

The catchments selected for the delisting strategy were chosen where previous momentum and future potential landowner buy-in (both based on partner knowledge) together will accelerate full-farm restoration and resulting water quality improvements. Delisting could take ten years as streams respond to the conservation practices put in place. Monitoring will help assure efforts are producing the desired results over time.

The Partners hosted six workshops and reviewed the scientific assessment of macroinvertebrates that indicate stream health. These workshops brought together on-the-ground implementation partners such as regional nonprofits, municipalities, watershed associations, agriculture preservation groups, conservation district, state agencies, and agricultural consulting firms. To support this



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effort, the Chesapeake Conservancy created two GIS maps to compile information and for partners to review the results of ongoing decision-making. They compiled data into the maps from 319 plans, the Chiques Creek Report Card, county comprehensive plan, databases from individual organizations, an Army Corps of Engineers report created for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, municipalities' Pollution Reduction Plans (CBPRPs) before the workshops began.

Partner organizations organized farms into five categories:

1. Restoration completed
2. Restoration underway
3. Shovel-ready projects
4. Willing landowners
5. Outreach priority

Across Lancaster County, nine Tier 1 catchments in the Chiques, Conestoga, Pequea, Octoraro watersheds were identified as good candidates for delisting. In those Tier 1 catchments, there are a total of 221 farms. In addition, another nine Tier 2 potential delisting segments were identified within the same four watersheds, totaling 169 farms. Across the county, we have collected over 1,400 data points from partner organizations regarding landowner relationships and existing or planned conservation or restoration activities.

Monitoring Progress

It takes significant time for streams to respond to implemented conservation practices. That's why improving water quality enough to delist streams could take up to ten years. To assure work is headed in the right direction, monitoring is a large part of the delisting process. It helps assure efforts are producing the desired results over time. Existing monitoring stations already in place and added in-stream stations will be used to provide real feedback on the impact of the project and ultimately build the case for delisting the stream when the time is right.

Goals and Objectives

The project will implement comprehensive conservation systems needed to achieve stream delisting and Chesapeake Bay restoration on agricultural lands in priority watersheds in Lancaster County by engaging project partners in a coordinated effort to minimize farmer financial requirements and reduce the complexity of navigating permitting and funding. Lancaster has lagged behind with Pennsylvania in Bay restoration efforts, and this project will rapidly increase implementation efforts.

The Partners bring together a diverse group of organizations including nonprofits, government agencies, and businesses who have a passion for collaborating with farmers to achieve water quality goals and farm economic sustainability, and a commitment to working to achieve a shared vision of clean and clear local water by 2040. Based on this vision, the Partners propose to work towards delisting impaired streams and implementing Lancaster's CAP, which was developed to improve water quality locally and in the Chesapeake Bay downstream.

The local, grassroots partnership and collaborative effort makes this RCPP proposal unique. Local organizations worked openly to identify priority catchments where an influx of RCPP and partner contributions have a strong chance of success. The project will work where delisting is an achievable goal and where source water protection is a high priority. While the scope of the project is all of Lancaster County, the Partners propose to focus and coordinate outreach, education, and technical assistance to implement comprehensive conservation systems in the identified priority catchments. Partner coordination and significant financial contributions will minimize farmers' financial requirements, reduce the complexity of navigating permitting and funding, and increase farmer willingness to install forested buffers—a practice critical to stream delisting and Chesapeake Bay restoration goals.

Expected Environmental, Economic, and Social Outcomes

RCPP funding will help to achieve the goal of stream delisting through improved land management on Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)-eligible farms in the targeted watersheds and, potentially, elsewhere in Lancaster County. This funding will be used in conjunction with partner contributions to implement comprehensive conservation systems and to encourage the adoption of high-impact conservation practices such as forested riparian buffers, as well as innovative practices such as manure injection and nitrogen bioreactors that are proven elsewhere in the country but are new to Lancaster County.

With a focus on delisting rather than regulatory compliance, the Partners are emphasizing how important conservation is to the quality of life and health of people in Lancaster, including the friends, families, and neighbors of participating farmers. This approach builds and expands on a local culture of stewardship and engages farmers in conservation activities that have a direct and tangible benefit on their immediate communities.



Photo by Will Parson/Chesapeake Bay Program

Next Steps

NRCS is expected to announce RCPP project selections in the summer of 2021. If chosen, on- farm implementation of this project is expected to fully commence in spring, 2022.

In the meantime:

- RCPP contributing partners will begin to meet on a regular basis to evolve roles and responsibilities, begin outreach activities in priority catchments, explore how to combine with other funding opportunities, and prepare to execute with excellence when approval is committed
- The Partners will begin to explore how to use the larger body of catchment data collected for other funding opportunities in pursuit of the watershed de-listing strategy and Countywide Action Plan.

Want More Information?

Reach out to Allyson Gibson or John Cox for more information on the collaborative process, RCPP application, or delisting strategy.

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