

Pennsylvania RFBs Initiative State Task Force

DRAFT Final Report

1. Executive Summary

Pennsylvania's RFBs Initiative State Task Force had robust participation from a wide variety of stakeholders. During the initial PA State Task Force meeting on September 10, 2014, stakeholders collectively identified issues and barriers to RFBs (RFB) establishment and maintenance. They volunteered to serve on the following subcommittees to further flesh out these issues and identify potential recommendations: 1) Technical issues; 2) Technical Assistance; 3) Training; 4) Publicity and Outreach; 5) Landowner-Client Strategy; and 6) Financial Incentives.

The following are the PA State Task Force's primary initial findings regarding the challenges and barriers to RFB establishment and maintenance with initial recommendations to address them:

A strong commitment of Federal, State, and local leadership is needed to support the program efforts and provide adequate resources in Pennsylvania and throughout the Bay watershed. Pennsylvania is a perhaps the leading example in the Chesapeake Bay of a State in which a diverse array of stakeholders are involved in RFB establishment and maintenance. However, to maximize results, it is vitally important that leadership set goals for acceleration of RFB implementation and to coordinate efforts, send a clear, consistent leadership message, provide adequate staffing resources, and commit to increased joint trainings and interagency and partner communication to enhance teamwork, increase consistency, and ensure efficient and most highly effective use of resources. A piece-meal approach without adequate resources will not address the issues associated with achieving desired program outcomes. Since RFBs are one of the most cost-effective best management practices (BMPs) to protect and enhance water quality, the failure to provide adequate resources could lead to higher societal costs.

Increased training is needed to ensure sufficient capacity to provide producers and landowners the assistance they need to enroll, establish, and maintain RFBs. Program complexity requires a well-trained staff of Farm Service Agency, (FSA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and Technical Service Providers, TSPs/Biologists employed by partners need to be trained together to create consistency and promote teamwork. Training topics include issues related to species selection, timing of practice installation, supporting practice size, scope and suitability, livestock, grazing management, economics, weed control and availability of other funding sources. It is essential and the staffs of all of the key agencies need to have a better understanding of the important role each agency/partner plays in developing contracts.

A key part of the Commonwealth's strategy is its February 27, 2015 funding request to FSA. This \$1,460,500 request focuses on increased staffing, training and resources for 3-years of technical

assistance to landowners. If granted, PA NRCS will enter into cooperative agreement(s) with partner(s) to provide technical assistance to landowners. This request reflects our understanding that these resources are needed in order to boost RFBs enrollment and reenrollment and to implement many of the state task force's recommendations, such as increased visits with landowners to assess tree survival, discuss maintenance and contractual requirements, identify invasive plants, and answer landowner questions.

2. Current Baseline and Goals

RFBs are a cost-effective means to reduce nutrient (nitrogen/phosphorus loading) into the Chesapeake Bay and are an integral element of Pennsylvania's Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP). Our State WIP goal is to increase the amount of RFBs to 89,630 acres by 2025 (at an estimated rate of 6,895 acres/year). Currently PA has 48,792 acres of RFB's in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. 24,000 acres of these RFBs have been established through Pennsylvania Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).

3. Agencies and Groups Participating in the Strategy

Numerous federal and state agencies as well as non-governmental organizations are actively involved in promoting RFBs in Pennsylvania, and, as such, have participated in Pennsylvania's RFBs Initiative State Task Force process. The list of participants, including specific roles, responsibilities, and resources that played a key role in this effort consists of:

USDA Farm Service Agency: FSA is the lead agency for administration of the voluntary Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). The Pennsylvania Susquehanna River CREP has been the leading program in PA's portion of Chesapeake Bay watershed for implementation of RFBs (RFBs) since it was launched in 2000. The FSA County office system with its local, farmer elected committee is specially designed and has responsibilities to oversee and administer various programs, including conservation, disaster, price support, farm credit, and other services for the public sector. Currently, PA FSA staffing levels are sufficient to administer FSA Conservation Programs.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service: NRCS is the lead technical agency for assistance with CRP and CREP and is a partner in the PA Susquehanna River CREP. NRCS is also the lead agency for programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP), which include RFBs and/or practices that enhance RFB performance.

US Forest Service – USFS is another agency of the USDA and administers the nation's 155 national forests and 20 national grasslands. Major divisions of the agency include the National Forest System, State and Private Forestry, and the Research and Development branch. Although not an official CREP partner agency in PA, USFS has actively participated in various activities

associated with improving the Chesapeake Bay as well as supporting other Federal and State agencies through their various conservation and natural resource programs and activities.

US Fish & Wildlife Service: US FWS works to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants, including their habitats. They also partner with private landowners in their mission to preserve and protect natural habitats and wildlife resources.

Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP): DEP is a regulatory agency that protects the Commonwealth's air, land and water from pollution. DEP is a CREP partner and since 2000, has provided over \$38,000,000 in cost share assistance and administration of the payments through Growing Greener Grants to the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts (PACD). The vast majority of this funding has been dedicated to enrollments in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. DEP's Watershed Support Staff (WSS) inspect RFBs to ensure RFBs are being protected, determine their size and species composition, and identify candidate RFBs for permanent protection under conservation easement. Over 95% of the inspected RFBs were in compliance. DEP also conducts water quality monitoring as part of the Instream Comprehensive Evaluation Survey (ICE). In addition, WSS is conducting long-term, site specific water quality monitoring to assess impact by CREP practices.

Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources: DCNR manages PA's state parks and forestland and works to foster community conservation partnerships and conserve the Commonwealth's natural resources. DCNR is a CREP partner.

Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission: PFBC protects, conserves and enhances the Commonwealth's aquatic resources (including fish, amphibians, reptiles, and endangered species of the above, such as bog turtles) and provides fishing and boating opportunities. Forested riparian buffers are vital to high-quality fisheries, protecting streambanks, helping to regulate stream temperatures and provide shade, and providing woody debris for fish habitat. PFBC is a CREP partner.

Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture: Is a CREP partner and, with the State Conservation Commission, provides funding for agriculture conservation technicians in 45 CREP counties who, among other things, assist with development of conservation plans.

Pennsylvania Game Commission: The PGC manages PA's wildlife and wildlife habitat, including game, heritage species, and threatened and endangered animals. PGC is a CREP partner and provides incentive payments for the establishment of native warm season grasses.

Pennsylvania State Conservation Commission: Is a CREP partner and administers the 66 conservation districts.

Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts (PACD): PACD is a CREP partner and represents 66 PA conservation districts. Pennsylvania's conservation districts provide critical outreach and technical assistance for CREP enrollment, including forested riparian buffers. PACD is a recent recipient of a \$340,000 PA Growing Greener Grant to do outreach statewide, including the Chesapeake Bay.

Stroud Water Research Center (Stroud): Stroud is not a CREP partner but conducts scientific research and education on freshwater ecosystems to deepen our understanding of the ecology of streams, rivers and their watersheds. In conjunction with The Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Stroud is conducting RFBs trainings. Stroud also has NFWF grant funding for a “raise the bar” approach to whole farm conservation, including forested riparian buffers, on nearly 20 farms in Lancaster and Franklin Counties.

The Pennsylvania Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils (RC&Ds): Are non-profit organizations that network people, resources and projects at the local level to conduct conservation. Many of the RC&Ds support RFBs enrollment and success. For example, Capital RC&D is utilizing grant funding to work with landowners and private landscape contractors in Franklin and Cumberland counties to provide professional maintenance to improve tree survival rates in CREP RFBs.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF): The Chesapeake Bay Foundation is an independent conservation organization dedicated solely to saving the Bay. CBF is a PA CREP partner and assists with technical assistance in many PA counties. CBF currently provides 5 field staff in PA Chesapeake Bay CREP counties to provide TA on forested buffer establishment and re-enrollment. CBF operates and services the 800-941-CREP phone line, and provides staff and RFB displays at events, such as farm shows.

Pheasants Forever: Pheasants Forever is dedicated to the conservation of pheasants, quail and other wildlife through wildlife habitat conservation and management. PF is a Chesapeake Bay CREP partner; PF Farm Bill Biologists through a co-operative agreement with NRCS and provide outreach and technical assistance to landowners and producers to enroll in CREP.

Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay: The Alliance is not a CREP partner, but the Alliance and its consultants are playing a role in helping to facilitate the RFBs state task force process.

Pennsylvania State University: Penn State works in cooperation with Pennsylvania Game Commission to monitor all bird species and rabbits in the original 20 CREP counties in the lower Susquehanna River basin.

4. Current Programs and Gaps

The PAC Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) was launched in 2000 with a 100,000 acres goal, targeting the 20 counties in the lower Susquehanna and Potomac River basins. The PA CREP was expanded in 2003 to add an additional 100,000 acres and to expand the target area to include the 23 northern tier counties. The PA CREP seeks to improve water quality and restore wildlife habitat in the upper and lower Susquehanna and lower Potomac River basins (and ultimately in the Chesapeake Bay itself) by reducing sediment and nutrient loadings through 17 conservation practices, including RFBs.

Currently PA CREP provides enrollment authority of up to 259,746 acres of highly erodible cropland or marginal pastureland along eligible streams, rivers, or waterbodies in 59 counties. Currently there are about 165,000 acres (137,670 acres of which are in PA's Chesapeake Bay watershed) enrolled in the program that provides cost-share payments, annual rental payments (10-15 years) and other financial and technical assistance incentives to enroll. Historically (1999-2013) roughly 15% of current PA CREP enrollment was in RFB's (it is the 3rd most popular conservation practice in the PA CREP). However, in recent years, the rate of enrollment in RFBs has dropped dramatically (only 3% in 2012-2013).

During the next 5 years, 7,713 acres of existing RFBs (CP22) CREP contracts will expire, particularly in the latter years, and are a priority for reenrollment. In recent years, CREP reenrollment has been adversely impacted by high commodity prices and other issues. To meet WIP goals, it is necessary to increase financial incentives, program flexibility, and increase staffing and outreach capacity.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – NRCS administers EQIP. Eligible program participants receive financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices (inclusive of riparian buffers), or activities such as conservation planning, that address natural resource concerns on their land. Payments are made to participants after conservation practices and activities identified in an EQIP plan of operations are implemented. Contracts can last up to ten years in duration. EQIP has been used in Pennsylvania to create some RFBs and, more commonly, for exclusionary livestock fencing from riparian areas.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) – Helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority resource concerns. Participants earn CSP payments for conservation performance – the higher the performance, the higher the payment. CSP enhancements include extending RFBs.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) – provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits. Newly created by the 2014 farm bill, ACEP consolidates three former programs: the Wetlands Reserve Program, the Grassland Reserve Program and the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program. RFBs could potentially be protected under the agricultural land easements, as part of the working farm, or under a wetland easement, as associated buffer. Under the 2014 Farm Bill, there are increased opportunities for CREP participants to transition enrollments under expiring CRP contracts to NRCS ACEP easement programs; further discussion is needed to provide guidance on how interested landowners could transition some RFBs from CREP to NRCS easement programs.

Newly funded Regional Conservation Partnership Program Projects (RCPP) through EQIP, CSP, and/or ACEP. Productive Farms and Clean Streams for Berks and Chester Counties – this is a 2015 RCPP that is sponsored by Stroud Research Center. Applicants wanting cost share to

assist with installing conservation practices are required to have installed or will install a RFBs on all waterways on the farm. The buffer must meet NRCS standards and specs.

The Growing Greener Grants – DEP provides grants to eligible organizations to plan and implement RFBs that are a minimum of 50 feet in width. In addition DEP provides millions of dollars for direct cost share payments of CREP practices including RFBs and the administration of these payments through Growing Greener grants to Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts (PACD). PACD recently was awarded a \$340,000 Growing Greener Grant for statewide CREP outreach.

CBF Buffer Bonus Program – Through a Growing Greener Grant from DEP, and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NIWF) private grant, CBF and partners work with farmers and landowners to implement conservation projects that will improve water quality and enhance farm profitability. Much of the work focuses on farm BMPs. The program encourages farmers to couple CREP forest buffers with on-farm improvements. For each acre of forest buffer planted, CBF offers participating farmers a "best management practice voucher" to fund conservation work.

RFBs Protection Land Owner Assurance – In order to receive state cost share on CREP conservation practices CP1, CP2, CP4d, CP8a, CP15A, CP 22 (RFBs), CP23 and CP29, the landowner must sign this agreement with DEP to protect all existing RFBs on their tracts for the life of the executed CRP-1.

Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists – Through an agreement with Pheasants Forever and with support from the Game Commission, NRCS funds six PF farm bill biologists and one Game Commission biologist's work in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Chesapeake Bay Implementation Grant (CBIG) – Provides funding to address water quality goals and reduce non-point source pollution to the Chesapeake Bay. The CBIG historically provided 80% of these funds to county conservation districts to employ Chesapeake Bay engineers and technicians and to implement agricultural best management practices. The CBIG provides cost-share funds, through county conservation districts, to landowners to agricultural best management practices that reduce non-point source pollution to the Chesapeake Bay. The CBIG provides for DEP staff costs in the non-point source and TMDL programs and education/outreach funding through the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts. In the most recent CBIG grant, awarded in October 2014, an additional \$1.19million was awarded to support local government funds for stormwater projects. The CBIG requires a 50/50 state match, which is historically through the Chesapeake Bay Agricultural Source Abatement line item in DEP's budget.

Section 319 USEPA NPS Funding - Pennsylvania's 319 Program focuses funding in select impaired priority watersheds having an EPA approved Watershed Implementation Plan. These watersheds are generally small in size ranging from the 12 to 14 HUC scale. Watershed Implementation Plans developed for these priority watersheds outline the sources of the

impairment, the TMDL pollutant load reduction goals for the watershed, and the types and locations of conservation practices (including establishment of RFBs) planned to take place in order to restore the watershed. Currently Pennsylvania has 36 priority 319 Program watersheds covering approximately 4.5% of the land area in Pennsylvania. These watersheds were selected as priority sites for the 319 program based generally on the public interest in the watershed and the expected recoverability of the streams. This assessment results in watersheds that are determined to be most likely to be restored in a relatively short timeframe (approximately 10 to 15 years) being those identified as the highest priority for program inclusion. Some of the factors assessed when determining the recoverability of a watershed include: local watershed organization involvement, general public interest in the watershed, public water supply recharge areas, involvement from other programs/agencies, small watershed size, level and complexity of impairment, ability of the local area to maintain restoration, willingness of landowners to participate, and the strength of the local stream monitoring effort.

DEP RFB Easement Program - DEP and PFBC have partnered with DCNR, American Hydro Power Dam, Juniata River Association, Central Pennsylvania Conservancy, the Blair and Huntingdon County Conservation Districts and the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy on a project to secure public access for fishing and place permanent easements on RFBs along the stream-banks. This partnership addresses interests for all agencies involved with a major emphasis on goals of the PFBC and DEP. The main focus for the PFBC is to establish access for anglers and provide pristine water ways for high quality fish habitat. DEP's priorities are to establish riparian forested buffer and place permanent easements on riparian buffers that will improve and protect the water quality of streams.

5. Factors Influencing Ability to Meet Goal

CREP challenges/constraints on enrollment: As described above, enrollment trends have been slowing in the program over the past 5 years for various reasons, including economic competitiveness issues. High commodity prices in recent years have adversely impacted enrollment. In addition, for many, assistance with fencing, stream crossings, water development, etc. can be a motivator to enroll, but this is undercut by the fact that cost share caps on many components, such as stream crossings, are too low and do not reflect prices participants are actually paying. Having flexibility to increase cost share caps will increase economic competitiveness and attractiveness of RFB enrollment. In addition, State and county FSA offices need to update the cost-share rates for all cost-shared components. Rates need to be updated annually to better reflect the local market rates for such components. An increase to cost share caps by national office would provide fair equitable increases for all CREPs.

Staffing cuts & impact on TA/program delivery: The increased workload associated with the necessary increase in RFB enrollment along with re-enrollment of expiring CRP contracts for RFBs during the next five years will provide a significant challenge to a greatly reduced staff for all of the agencies.

There is also a need for greater interagency coordination, more staff training and a stronger signal that RFB enrollment is a high priority. This would help provide better and more consistent customer service (at present CRP/CREP is administered differently from county to county). As discussed above, the breadth of CREP partners is a strength for PA, but greater communication, team building and shared training is necessary to make their combined efforts more efficient and successful.

Technical assistance is the key element for outreach, customer service, practice success, and accountability. At the current staffing levels, program enrollment, conservation planning activities, ongoing maintenance, compliance of contracts and practices, and the potential to achieve WIP goals are all challenged.

Outreach: RFBs establishment is a practice that typically requires working one-on-one with a farmer/landowner as this is a more complex practice than, for example, grass filter strips. We have seen strong examples of how dramatically the work of highly motivated, highly credible, local outreach providers can make in boosting RFB enrollments. PA had been challenged by insufficient resources for outreach however the recently approved Growing Greener grant with PACD is for 100% CREP outreach. We believe this grant will make possible a coordinated RFB outreach strategy to maximize and leverage existing resources and impact, enlist new resources, and inform farmers/landowners of new incentives and opportunities we hope to achieve. With 7,713 acres expiring in the next 5 years, reenrollment is an important challenge to prevent slippage in RFB enrollment goals and is a high priority particularly given recent weakness in RFB reenrollment statistics. During 2013, PA FSA was challenged to have funding for any outreach activities (including postage for notification letters of expiring contracts and updating and printing PA CREP brochures).

Maintenance/Establishment: Low survival rates of trees can be a disincentive to signing up for RFBs or reenrolling RFBs. Adequately maintaining RFBs, particularly in the early years when they are just getting established is a high priority for long-term RFB success and to prevent issues with invasive species. A significant challenge is that annual maintenance payments are too low and since they are rolled into the annual CRP rental rate, many participants are unaware that they are being compensated (at least in part) to conduct maintenance. Spraying herbicides is particularly needed in the early years and is often something participants cannot do themselves. PA discovered years ago that it is much more cost effective to expand the RFB establishment period from 2 to 3-4 years, and provide cost share for spraying to control invasive plants. PA continues to offer cost share from FSA and the State for up to three post planting applications, and offers an extended establishment period to four years if needed.

6. Management Approach

A. Leadership, Coordination and Administration of Programs

Pennsylvania seeks to further enhance its coordinated, RFBs strategy to boost RFBs enrollment/reenrollment through:

- Seeking policy/guidance adjustments (including a CREP amendment) to address barriers to enrollment;
- Regularly convening parties with technical expertise to continue to improve practice guidance to include known best practices and emerging insights. This should include updating practice guidance related to tree shelter use, methods to improve shrub survival, specifics of herbicide applications (including specific requirements such as herbicide spot spraying size) and other related topics.
- Sending a strong leadership message from the highest levels of the relevant local, state and federal agencies that RFB enrollment/reenrollment is a high priority and promoting interagency cooperation;
- Developing and seeking funding for a coordinated, multi-partner RFB outreach strategy including messaging on stewardship and environmental benefits of RFBs.
- Identifying staffing needs for outreach and technical assistance and seeking funding to fill them.

A key part of this strategy is to identify opportunities for better interagency cooperation and to provide the farmer/landowner with a smoother, quicker, more pleasant enrollment experience.

This also is an important opportunity to send a more consistent message across the board, letting producers/landowners know the importance of RFBs and about enrollment opportunities in CREP, EQIP, and other RFB programs. It will be important to rollout the RFB strategy and RFB outreach campaign concurrent with approval of the requested policy changes/CREP amendment. “Piece-mealing” policy changes should be avoided to the maximum extent possible because it detracts from increased RFB enrollment momentum and unfairly penalizes early adopters.

Pennsylvania has a 15 year history of partnering with NGOs on RFBs. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Pheasants Forever, have provided significant technical and financial assistance to the project. These organizations continue their commitment to the support of the effort. These organizations provide critical outreach support and have continue to provide additional assistance to help fill program gaps. Increased use of cooperative agreements, personal service agreements and other agreements can provide further support at the local level to conservation districts or local field offices.

B. Need for Policy or Guidance Adjustments

Although flexibility to provide partial practice incentive payments (PIPs) as costs are incurred is an issue for many states, it is not an issue in PA because the State pays its cost share to participants concurrently with FSA cost share reimbursement. This eliminates the cash-flow crunch participants are experiencing in other states and, in PA, the PIP serves as a powerful incentive at the end to ensure that all components, including RFB planting/establishment, are successfully completed.

C. Landowner Outreach and Customer Service Strategy

The vast majority of RFB acreage that has been enrolled in Pennsylvania's CREP has been cropland, but marginal pastureland is also meaningful. One of the key selling points of the program has been the high level of financial assistance provided for fencing, stream crossings, water developments and water facilities that the federal government provides along with the annual rental payment. Enrollment history in PA CREP has shown the difference highly trained and motivated local staff can make through concentrated outreach effort and sufficient one-on-one discussions with farmers in the community to promote CREP. In the early years of the PA CREP the State and Partners hired biologists to work primarily on CREP. These biologists along with many dedicated NRCS, FSA and conservation district staff were instrumental for the high implementation rate of RFBs for the program.

Pennsylvania seeks to expand the coordinated approach among the multiple partners within the project area. The agencies are short-staffed. Staffing increases are needed to provide outreach and to provide sufficient capacity to allow timely enrollment of RFBs and sufficient technical service – especially during the first 5 years. Each RFB should be evaluated every 3 years after establishment.

D. Establishment, Maintenance, Compliance and Reenrollment

During the next 5 years, 7,713 acres of existing RFBs (CP22) CREP contracts will expire, particularly in the latter years, and are a priority for reenrollment. Encouraging CREP participants to reenroll (or, in some cases, to transition to ACEP easements) is a high priority. Reenrolling RFB is a high priority in order to protect the significant investment (financial, staff, time) that has been made to acquire and implement the contracts. This will require specific and timely outreach to participants with expiring CRP contracts and, in some cases, technical assistance to help participants to resolve compliance issues that may otherwise preclude eligibility for reenrollment. In addition, FSA staff is prepared to address issues related to contract related issues related to sale of the land or issues related to the transfer of contracts related to an estate.

Establishment issues and low survival rates of trees can be an issue. Adequately maintaining RFBs, particularly in the early years when they are just getting established is a high priority for long-term RFB success. A significant challenge is that annual maintenance payments are too low and since they are rolled into the annual CRP rental rate, many participants are unaware that they are being compensated (at least in part) to conduct maintenance. Spraying herbicides is particularly needed in the early years and is often something participants cannot do themselves. PA discovered years ago that it is much more cost effective to expand the RFB establishment period from 2 to 3-4 years, and provide cost share for spraying to control invasive plants. PA continues to offer cost share from FSA and the State for up to three post planting applications, and has extended the establishment period to four years if needed.

Recommendations:

1. Promote RFB reenrollment in CREP:
 - a. Provide targeted outreach to CREP participants in the last years of their CRP contracts. Have local staff contact the producer and update the producer on the program. Post card is sent if CRP contract is expiring in the next 3 years (resend the next year unless replied that not interested in reenrolling).
 - b. Provide participants with information and TA regarding any potential upgrades (e.g. expansion of acres, new payment rates or cost share for alternate water & stream fencing).
 - c. Provide TA to help participants resolve compliance issues.
 - d. Encourage participants with reenrolling RFBs to include upgrades, such as increased acres and/or alternative water and stream fencing.
2. NRCS/FSA/NGO cooperation with outreach providers to inform CREP participants with expiring contracts of options to protect RFBs under ACEP easements.
3. Ensure that NRCS/ NGOs certify practice/component compliance for all CREP contracts.
4. Ensure that NRCS/NGOs conduct annual status reviews or periodic site visits during the life of the CREP contract and provide such data to FSA (CED/County FSA Committee). This will help reduce non-compliance issues and assist with producer awareness of planned items and contract requirements.
5. Seek to improve establishment success by increasing compliance checks and visits. Continue to prioritize checks of RFB.

6. Complete a comprehensive status review every three years after the first four years of tree establishment. Perform this status review between the months of June and September so that you can properly evaluate tree condition and also inspect vegetation to confirm the exclusion of livestock. All BMPs should be walked and visually inspected. Maintenance needs (ex. fence maintenance/ tree tube removal) should be identified and reviewed with the participants. Contract conditions should be reviewed and initialed by participants to serve as a reminder of contract requirements and deter potential contract violations.

7. Update and maintain the web presence. Expand the current CREP website that would allow producers a simple one-stop visually appealing site to gather additional information on RFB. This site includes information on the:

- a) Benefits of RFB,
- b) How to sign up,
- c) Frequently asked questions,
- d) Maintenance issues including control of common invasive species
- e) Financial benefits, and
- f) Pictures/Youtube videos.

E. Technical Assistance Delivery

As discussed above, since 2002 staffing for FSA and NRCS have been adversely impacted by budgetary constraints and, new farm bill programs have further increased workload.

Increased staffing will permit:

- Greater opportunity for one-on-one contacts
- Improved customer service/customer experience (e.g., quicker turn-around times)
- Reduction in out-year maintenance contract compliance issues through better follow up with RFB participants
- Ability to develop targeted marketing, conservation buffer tours, education tools, etc.
- Ability to carry out necessary and required technical servicing actions (see Technical Assistance section)

Increased joint training is also a priority. Topics include: RFBs and their importance; hands on training regarding management and maintenance of RFBs; site, species and hydrologic conditions training; training in latest tools; and training in marketing the programs and packaging buffers with other practices as part of whole farm planning.

Identify regional CREP specialists with in-depth knowledge of RFBs practice and farming operations (e.g., grazing systems and horses in SE Pennsylvania).

In order to increase the installation of small acres that need to be buffered, explore the development of pooling small acreage riparian forested buffers along an identified stream corridor.

F. Financial Incentives

The PA CREP provides a producer both cost-share funding and multiple financial incentives to enroll in CP22 for RFBs. The producer receives from the federal government an annual rental payment which consists of a base rental rate, a rental rate incentive plus an annual maintenance rate of \$2 to \$5/acre (depending on the practice selected). In addition, the producer receives a one-time signing incentive payment of \$100-\$150/acre. The producer also receives cost-share assistance for 50% of the eligible establishment costs once the practice has been certified that it has been completed to the specifications and receives an additional Practice Incentive Payment, equal to 40% of the eligible establishment costs for the practice, after all planned practices are completed. The State provides cost share on all PA CREP practices, except CP9 shallow water areas. To qualify for cost share on CP22, the buffer needs to be 50 feet wide or greater and the landowner must buffer all lands they own. If they have lands that are already buffered, they must sign a RFBs Landowner's Assurance Agreement with the state. The State provides 50% up to \$850 (unfenced) or \$1250 (fenced). FSA pays up to \$55/acre for PPAs. The State matches FSA cost share up to \$55/acre.

7. Work Plan

A. Leadership, Coordination and Administration of Programs

1. Continue to promote, coordinate and recognize partnering federal, state, local governments, NGOs and farm organizations

Next steps include:

- a. Coordinate outreach efforts with RCPP partners to "cross-sell" RFBs
- b. Coordinate efforts to increase the amount of resources for RFB implementation.

2. Send strong signal that RFBs are a priority/interagency leadership

Next steps include:

- a. Develop a CREP event in which possibly the Governor and/or High Ranking USDA official kick-off the new changes. Possibly 30th Anniversary of CRP at a CREP site.

- b. High ranking officials present agency staff recognition for RFB enrollments
- c. Provide more interagency RFB training opportunities
- d. Increase staffing for the project
- e. Provide performance recognition for all governmental and NGO's working on RFB enrolment and reenrollment.

B. Landowner Outreach and Customer Service Strategy

Next steps include:

Develop coordinated, joint PA RFB outreach plan that includes the following:

- Assuming recommendations for increased financial incentives (updated cropland rental rates) focus outreach campaign on informing producers/landowners of these favorable developments that better meet their needs. Growing Greener grant for PACD includes a professional market research firm to develop and craft a marketing/outreach effort.
- Continue too outreach to CRP/CREP participants with expiring contracts in the current fiscal year with a re-enrollment post card reminder.
- Strategy for outreach to absentee landowners. This includes seeking funding for mass mailing to absentee landowners for entire PA Bay watershed (identify using GIS data).
- Update existing and create new media material, including a new PA CREP brochure. Update web-pages updated and develop informational material (video, success stories, diary & RFBs, etc.). PA currently has 1,000 copies of the Buffer Calendars available for participants which answers many questions and provides helpful information concerning RFB's.
- PA previously developed signage so that neighbors and others know the field is serving a conservation purpose and just not "poor farming" due to greater amount of native plants.
- Increase training to county office staff on the benefits of riparian buffer and outreach efforts. Develop a questions and answers information sheet to help the staff. Staff should have information on economics, tax impacts, and succession of contracts.

- Coordinate on-the-ground outreach resources for more outreach staff – experience shows the importance of one-on-one personal contact with producers by credible/knowledgeable/local outreach providers.
- Cross reference stream layer with CLU layer and county records for RFB outreach.

C. Technical Assistance Delivery

Next steps include:

Uniform or consistent training to all government and NGO employees to assure a consistent message is given to all CREP applicants.

Increased staffing will permit:

- a. Greater opportunity for one-on-one contacts
- b. Improved customer service/customer experience (e.g., quicker turn-around times)
- c. Reduction in out-year maintenance contract compliance issues through better follow up with RFB participants
- d. Ability to develop targeted marketing, conservation buffer tours, education tools, etc.
- e. Ability to carry out necessary and required technical servicing actions (see Technical Assistance section)

D. Financial Incentives

Next Steps include:

1. FSA will update SRRs in normal cycle.
2. Review national rate caps and suggest needed adjustments to keep up with real world costs.
3. Seek to increase maintenance rate to \$10/acre/year.
4. Explore possible role of NGO(s) to incentivize contractors to conduct maintenance on small enrollments by providing a financial incentive, such as a mobilization fee, and/or through pooling maintenance jobs.

E. Landowner Outreach and Customer Service Strategy

Pennsylvania has the highest amount of acreage enrolled in CREP in the Nation. Strong leadership, good working relationships strong support by NGOs and farm groups have all been instrumental in the success of the program. Enrollment history in PA CREP has shown the difference highly trained and motivated local staff can make through concentrated outreach effort and sufficient one-on-one discussions with farmers in the community to promote CREP. In the early years of the PA CREP the State and Partners hired biologists to work primarily on CREP. These biologist along with many dedicated NRCS, FSA and conservation district staff were instrumental for the high implementation rate of RFBs for the program.

Pennsylvania seeks to expand the coordinated approach among the multiple partners with-in the project area. The agencies are short-staffed. Staffing increases are needed to provide outreach and to provide sufficient capacity to allow timely enrollment of RFBs and sufficient technical service – especially during the first 5 years. It is the general feeling that local staff that is familiar with the community and local environmental conditions should be the primary source of technical assistance. This will require putting additional staff, NGO's, in areas that will experience significant re-enrollment and which have the potential for significant amounts of new work load.

F. Establishment, Maintenance, Compliance and Reenrollment

During the next 5 years, 7,713 acres of existing RFBs (CP22) CREP contracts will expire, particularly in the latter years, and are a priority for reenrollment. Encouraging CREP participants to reenroll (or, in some cases, to transition to ACEP easements) is a high priority. Reenrolling RFB is a high priority in order to protect the significant investment (financial, staff, time) that has been made to acquire and implement the contracts. This will require specific and timely outreach to participants with expiring CRP contracts and, in some cases, technical assistance to help participants resolve compliance issues that may otherwise preclude eligibility for reenrollment. In addition, staff should be prepared to address issues related to contract related issues related to sale of the land or issues related to the transfer of contracts related to an estate.

Establishment problems and low survival rates of trees can be an issue. Adequately maintaining RFBs, particularly in the early years when they are just getting established is a high priority for long-term RFB success. Increasing annual status reviews during the first 5 years of the contract will reduce some of the issues. Currently the PA CREP permits up to 3 post-planting weed control measures. This has been very beneficial in the establishment of the practice. Another challenge is that annual maintenance payments are generally well below the actual costs. Annual maintenance payments are issued as a part of the annual CRP rental rate and

many participants are unaware that they are being compensated (at least in part) to conduct maintenance. The proposal to notify participants that maintenance is a part of the annual payment may be included in the CRP annual payment statement. Spraying herbicides is particularly needed in the early years of the contract and some producers may not have the experience, time or equipment to do the work themselves.

Recommendations:

1. Promote RFB reenrollment in CREP:

a. Provide targeted outreach to CREP participants in the last 3 years of their CRP contracts. During annual status reviews discuss with the producer opportunities and benefits associated with re-enrollment. Using the database of existing participants send letters to producers 6 months prior to contract expiration. Have local staff personally contact the producer and update the producer on program updates including higher payment rates.

b. Provide participants with information and TA regarding any potential upgrades (e.g., expansion of acres or cost share for alternate water & stream fencing)

c. Provide TA to help participants resolve compliance issues to return current contract to compliance providing the opportunity for future re-enrollment.

2. NRCS/FSA/NGO cooperation with outreach providers to inform CREP participants with expiring contracts of options to protect RFBs. Ensure efforts are coordinated and consistent.

3. Ensure that NRCS/NGO certify practice/component compliance for all CREP contracts.

4. Seek to improve participant compliance with maintenance obligations through increased landowner/farmer education. An additional 1,000 copies of the Buffer Calendar Guide is available to provide answers and information on common RFB issues.

5. Ensure that NRCS/ NGO conduct annual status reviews during the first five years. Complete a comprehensive status review every three years after the first five years of tree establishment. Provide such data to FSA (CED/County FSA Committee). Perform this status review between the months of June and September so that you can properly evaluation tree condition and also inspect vegetation to confirm the exclusion of livestock. All BMPs should be walked and visually inspected. Maintenance needs (ex. fence maintenance/ tree tube removal) should

be identified and reviewed with the participants. Contract conditions should be reviewed and initialed by participants to serve as a reminder of contract requirements and deter potential contract violations. This will help reduce non-compliance issues and assist with producer awareness of planned items and contract requirements.

6. Update and maintain the web presence. Expand the current CREP website that would allow producers a simple one-stop visually appealing site to gather additional information on RFB.

8. Policy or Guidance Adjustments

1. Require annual status review – for all CREP practices during first 5 years and provide periodic annual status reviews after establishment.
2. Increase annual status reviews from 10% to 25% for all CREP contracts.
3. Continue to work with NGOs to continue and expand buffer bonus program.
4. Make adjustments in EQIP ranking to allow for a contracted buffer to get additional ranking points, even though the buffer is not installed or established