

Pennsylvania in the Balance 2022

Goal: to develop highly functional systems to accelerate efficient, effective, and high impact conservation implementation on Pennsylvania farms

The Need

Over the last year, historic state and federal investments have been made to support Pennsylvania agriculture in implementing conservation practices that improve farm operations and water quality. These investments present a tremendous opportunity, but require rapid development of a policy and resource framework to ensure efficient and effective delivery to benefit producers and meet conservation objectives across the Commonwealth.

The Pennsylvania in Balance Conference

On December 12-14, 2022, over 100 leaders in agriculture and conservation gathered to collaboratively explore the development of a policy and resource support network to ensure Pennsylvania can fully take advantage of these resources. Convened by the Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences, *PA in Balance 2022* marked the latest in a series of these conferences aimed at providing a forum where motivated leaders in agriculture and the environment work collaboratively to identify new, innovative solutions that can help ensure thriving, productive agriculture while meeting water quality goals for Pennsylvania's local streams and the Chesapeake Bay.

After three highly productive days, clear themes and early recommendations emerged that, if rapidly seized upon, can significantly advance Pennsylvania agriculture as the solution to major environmental challenges and ensure it remains a thriving and growing sector of Pennsylvania's economy, communities, and quality of life.

The Pillars

These recommendations are supported by three pillars that support existing opportunities:

Momentum. The Pennsylvania agricultural and conservation community has tremendous momentum at this moment. New and existing state and federal funding programs provide an unprecedented amount of funding for agricultural conservation. The Commonwealth's innovative Countywide Action Plan (CAP) process for implementing the Phase 3 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Implementation Plan provides a solid foundation of locally-led partnerships upon which to build. Farmers across the Commonwealth, several of whom shared their stories at the conference, are national leaders in implementing conservation into their business plans and thriving as a result. We recommend seizing upon this momentum while addressing the barriers that act as stumbling blocks.

Risk Management. By the necessity of their profession, farmers are adept risk managers. Funding for technical assistance and implementation can help farmers manage risk related to environmental concerns, climate, cost, and productivity. We can help further manage risk by developing and supporting an agricultural technical assistance workforce that is commensurate with producers' needs for implementing conservation on farms across the Commonwealth.

Mitigation. Momentum can be capitalized and risk mitigated by investing in a technical assistance center and developing improved funding delivery systems that support local partnerships, building a pipeline of public and private technical support for farmers, quantifying the economics of conservation, and allowing farmers to focus on farming.

The Recommendations

PA in Balance 2022 conference outcomes included the following recommendations for accelerating efficient, effective, and high impact conservation implementation on Pennsylvania farms:

1. Streamline the conservation funding delivery system.

The current funding system is cumbersome and inefficient. Process halts momentum. In the Chesapeake Bay watershed portion of Pennsylvania, the CAP block grants provide a successful pilot on which to build a more efficient delivery system. Ideas for innovation include: combined funding block grant delivery; a common application; local financial coordinators; precertification of implementation partners; bundled contracting; and programmatic-based matching.

2. Invest in workforce development and training to position Pennsylvania as the nation's career and innovation hub for agricultural and natural resources conservation.

Increasing technical assistance (TA) capacity is critical to accelerating conservation implementation. TA capacity analyses should be updated to identify current needs and impact. A training center involving existing conservation training partners (State Conservation Commission, NRCS, and Penn State College of Ag) should be developed to accelerate TA training and provide a comprehensive and sustained resource for all applicable TA training needs supporting all sectors (agencies, private, nonprofit). A priority for this center is to develop intensive short courses to allow for priority skills certification. Strategies for growth of both public and private sector should be explored. A comprehensive workforce recruitment strategy should be developed and deployed within secondary schools (particularly FFA, tech schools), trade schools, colleges, and universities. A marketing strategy should be developed to aid this recruitment and promote Pennsylvania as the nation's career and innovation hub for ag and natural resources conservation.

3. Support local partnership and implementation coordination to ensure resources are deployed efficiently and tailored to local needs.

Developing funding implementation strategies locally is key to insuring that strategies are tailored to local needs; the CAP process again provides a foundation and model. Local project and financial coordination and partnership management must be funded and resources to guide local partnership facilitation and engagement must be developed, including evaluation metrics for local prioritization so funds are spent wisely for maximum impact.

4. Extend the agricultural and conservation partnership network to businesses and corporations.

Educating businesses and corporations on agricultural conservation goals can lead to initiatives that accelerate conservation adoption and benefit farmers. The Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay provides a successful model for building corporate partnerships. A concerted outreach effort from agricultural and conservation partners to the corporate community should be made, particularly in light of emerging climate-smart opportunities on farms.

5. Position Pennsylvania partnerships for climate-smart commodities as centers for innovation and market development.

Multiple Pennsylvania-focused projects to advance partnerships for climate-smart commodities have recently been funded by USDA. A Pennsylvania working group should be formed of the major USDA-funded projects to determine how projects can collaboratively make Pennsylvania a center for innovation and market development in climate-smart agriculture.