Chesapeake Bay Program
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Subject: STAC Response to Chesapeake Bay Program Review Requests

At its 2026 Annual Retreat held June 15–17, 2026, at the National Conservation Training Center, STAC discussed recent requests from the Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) to conduct independent scientific reviews of the new 4D Interpolator tool, the Phase 7 Watershed Model, and the Phase 7 Estuary Model. The 4D Interpolator review is currently proposed to occur between November 2026 and March 2027, while reviews of the two Phase 7 models are proposed for February through July 2027.

STAC supports, in principle, proceeding with all three reviews. These products represent important components of the Chesapeake Bay Program's scientific toolbox and will play a significant role in evaluating management actions, projecting future conditions, assessing progress toward water quality goals, informing implementation of EPA's Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL), and improving living resource habitat suitability in the Bay. Independent scientific review is critical to ensuring that these tools are scientifically robust, transparent, credible, and broadly accepted by the Partnership and its stakeholders.

In keeping with EPA Peer Review guidance, STAC believes that the reviews should be designed as high-quality, independent scientific assessments that provide expert advice on both the specific charge questions and any broader scientific issues identified by the review panels. To achieve this objective, STAC recommends continued collaboration with CBP in developing the review charges, scope, and deliverables for each effort.

STAC further emphasizes that successful execution of these reviews will require adequate time, resources, and logistical support. Review panels must be provided with comprehensive technical documentation before beginning their work to allow sufficient preparation and evaluation. STAC anticipates that reviewer compensation, travel, meeting facilitation, administrative coordination, and report preparation will require financial and personnel support beyond that available within STAC's current budget. For the major Phase 7 Watershed and Estuary Model reviews, STAC strongly prefers in-

person review panels, which provide greater opportunity for detailed technical discussion, collaborative deliberation, and efficient consensus-building.

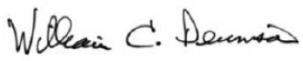
STAC also notes concerns regarding the proposed review schedule. As currently proposed, the timing of the 4D Interpolator review will overlap with initiation of the Phase 7 model reviews, creating significant demands on both STAC and the scientific community. Review scope, scheduling, and available resources should therefore be aligned to ensure that all reviews can be conducted thoroughly and effectively without compromising quality.

In discussing review panel composition, STAC emphasized that scientific expertise should be the primary consideration in reviewer selection. Potential conflicts of interest and prior associations with the CBP should be appropriately disclosed and evaluated based on EPA Peer Review guidance but should not automatically disqualify highly qualified experts when specialized expertise is limited or difficult to obtain.

STAC also discussed an informal request to review a new Living Resources Habitat Suitability (LRHS) modeling framework during the second half of 2027. While members recognized the importance of incorporating living resource outcomes into future assessment frameworks, the consensus was that a formal review of a completed LRHS product may be premature. The framework remains under development, and additional scientific context is needed regarding model structure, intended applications, and its relationship to other Partnership assessment tools. STAC would welcome the opportunity to conduct a preliminary review of the LRHS framework during the second half of 2027 to help inform its development and identify key scientific considerations. STAC also notes that many of the physical and biogeochemical factors influencing habitat suitability will be addressed as part of the Phase 7 Watershed and Estuary Model reviews.

Finally, STAC encourages the CBP to provide a clear conceptual framework to all review panels describing how the 4D Interpolator, Phase 7 models, Living Resources Habitat Suitability framework, and future assessment and implementation frameworks are intended to interact. A clear articulation of these relationships will help reviewers understand the role of each product and ensure that review recommendations are appropriately targeted and integrated.

Sincerely,



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