

Conserving Healthy Forests

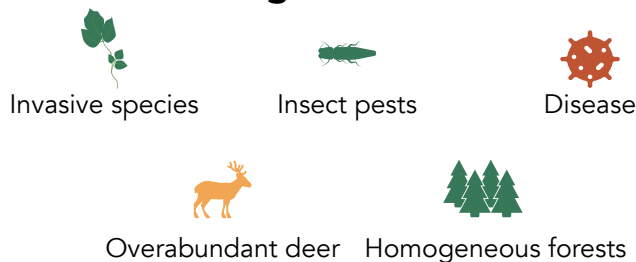


Healthy forests are foundational to enhancing communities, bolstering rural economies, and sustaining clean waterways. In addition, healthy forests are better able to withstand variable stressors. In 2026, forestry researchers, managers, and practitioners in the Chesapeake Bay watershed convened to review the science and develop actionable recommendations on how active forest management and stewardship can be used to improve forest health and conserve forests over the long term.

What We Know

- A healthy forest is a resilient forest. Resilient forests continue to provide clean water and multiple other societal benefits, even when stressed.
- There are major threats to forest health in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Forests are more vulnerable to these threats as land use changes and forest patches become smaller and more fragmented. Although some of the threats cannot be managed, forests are most resilient when we actively manage threats that we can control.

Manageable Threats



Not Manageable Threats



- Active forest management improves forest health and increases resilience to threats. Active forest management activities include:
 1. Invasive species control
 2. Pest and disease detection and control
 3. Deer management
 4. Prescribed fire
 5. Reforestation to increase species diversity and improve connectivity across the landscape
 6. Sustainable harvesting to allow the remaining trees to grow larger and enable regeneration of new trees





Key Recommendations

Keeping existing forests healthy benefits people, the economy, and the environment. The following recommendations will enable the active management needed to strengthen forest resilience and promote forest conservation in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

- **Talk Forests:** Develop and deploy a unified, positive, and compelling forest conservation communication strategy that positions healthy, resilient working forests as essential to the environment and rural economies, using consistent messaging amplified through partners and credible messengers.
- **Grow Networks:**
 - Strengthen and connect local and regional forestry networks throughout the watershed, leveraging existing collaborative structures to support shared learning, rapid response, and coordination across forest landscapes.
 - Build long-term, cross-sector capacity for forest management by expanding the regional forestry workforce, increasing the availability of technical assistance, and sharing expertise to effectively scale forest management and restoration in the watershed.
- **Cultivate Supportive Policy:** Identify policy and enabling conditions that remove barriers to forest management, reduce perverse incentives, and support active, sustainable forest management across jurisdictions.
- **Leverage Forest Markets:** Support development of diverse and sustainable forest product markets as a foundational driver of forest health, rural economies, and environmental improvement, including new market pathways for low-value woody material.
- **Fund Healthy Forests:**
 - Develop diversified, accessible, and scalable funding models that enable forest conservation and management—especially for small acreage landowners—and support long-term stewardship, maintenance, and innovation.
 - Invest in targeted research that improves understanding of forest conditions, ecological processes, and management impacts to better guide Chesapeake Bay Program decisions.
- **Look at the Bigger Picture:** Adopt an adaptive, landscape-scale forest management approach that focuses on resilience, long-term planning, species diversity, and connectivity, paired with consistent maintenance and invasive species control.



All photos by Will Parson, Chesapeake Bay Program

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