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Chesapeake Bay Trust and Partners to Establish First Large-Scale Environmental Justice Participatory Fund in Mid-Atlantic with \$17 Million Investment from USDA's Forest Service

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(Annapolis, Maryland) September 20, 2023 - The Chesapeake Bay Trust (the Trust), with nine other partners, has been selected to receive and administer a \$17 million grant from the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry Program. The Trust and its core partners will leverage these funds to establish and seed the Mid-Atlantic Environmental Justice Fund (the Fund), the first large-scale environmental justice participatory fund in the region.

A participatory fund is a method of grant-making in which members of impacted communities have the power to decide who and what to fund.

The Chesapeake Bay Trust, the distributor of funds from the Maryland Chesapeake vehicle license plate program and 40 other sources across the seven-jurisdiction watershed, has long empowered communities and groups to lead environmental actions through grant-making and other resources. The Trust will partner with Dr. Sacoby Wilson, the co-director of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 3 Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Center and the Director of the Center for Community Engagement, Environmental Justice, and Health (CEEJH); the National Wildlife Federation (NWF); Howard University, Environmental Finance Center (EFC); and a network of regional environmental justice leaders to establish the Mid-Atlantic Environmental Justice Fund to advance environmental justice, urban forestry, public health, economic opportunity, and climate resilience through ecological services that are co-designed and co-delivered.

The Mid-Atlantic Environmental Justice Fund is the first of its kind in the Chesapeake region and stands to correct longstanding injustices for communities most affected by pollution by providing funding and resources directly to the communities and community-based organizations that have historically faced constraints in competing for funding to address environmental justice issues. In addition to awarding grants to under-resourced groups, the Fund's core partners will provide outreach and technical assistance support so a larger number of grantees can more effectively address localized and systemic disparities in environmental and public health.

"The Chesapeake Bay Trust specializes in establishing pooled funds with public and private dollars, and we are honored to bring this expertise to the broader partnership. We hope to expand this Fund in the coming year to include additional federal partners and private funders, as well as to target climate resiliency, public health, and other environmental justice disparities in addition to urban and community forestry," said Jana Davis, Ph.D., president of the Chesapeake Bay Trust.

Participatory funding, a ground-breaking philanthropic model, cedes decision-making power to those most affected by injustice. The model is widely considered to be the most inclusive and equitable method of distributing funding within marginalized communities. The Participatory Fund will ensure representatives from communities most affected are involved in decision-making at key points through the process, including the development of the application process, proposal evaluation criteria, and the proposal review and selection processes.

“We will achieve environmental justice only when the power, resources, and decision-making are yielded to the communities most impacted by environmental harms and related health inequities. We know that the participatory funding model will be the most effective method to distribute these funds and intend for the Mid-Atlantic Environmental Justice Fund to be a leader and exemplar for how philanthropy must evolve, how philanthropy must cede power to frontline and fence-line communities most impacted by environmental, climate, and energy injustices” said Dr. Sacoby Wilson, a co-leader of the new Fund.

Fund administrators will collaborate with leaders from the South Baltimore Community Land Trust (SBCLT), Sentinels of the Eastern Shore Health (SESH), the Overbook Center (OC), Center de Apoyo de Familiar (CAF), and Empower DC on localized outreach, technical assistance, and recruitment of external technical reviewers who represent affected communities.

“The only way to authentically and durably address the challenges facing historically marginalized communities is if the communities themselves develop and lead the solutions,” said Dr. Adrienne Hollis, vice president of Environmental Justice, Public Health, and Community Revitalization at the National Wildlife Federation and co-director of the EPA Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Grant. “We are honored to support this approach in partnership with EJ Hub leaders through the Mid-Atlantic Environmental Justice Fund. We are committed to providing our expertise and support needed to ensure widespread success and that community needs and desires drive this important effort.”

Many studies document the major health disparities caused by air pollution, low tree canopy, heat island affect, and lack of access to public green spaces in the Mid-Atlantic’s low-income and communities of color, including in Washington, DC, Baltimore, Richmond, North Delaware, and more. These disparities have been caused over time by redlining and segregation that leads to the disproportionate burden of traffic-related air pollution, goods movement, brownfields, urban heat islands, infrastructure and industrial siting, and stormwater runoff in these communities. USDA’s Urban and Community Forestry experts and environmental justice leaders alike contend that equitable tree planting, maintenance, and green space access in these communities will lead to better public health outcomes for these historically disadvantaged groups.

“Healthy community forests play a critical role in addressing ecological challenges and public health disparities in environmental justice communities in the Mid-Atlantic and beyond. Urban forests can combat urban heat islands, help purify air, stave off flooding and can also play a critical role in workforce and economic development. The Mid-Atlantic Environmental Justice Fund is positioned to not only strengthen forests throughout the region, but also help build a healthier and safer Mid-Atlantic for all,” said Lemir Teron, a professor of Environmental Studies at Howard University and a forestry partner for the Fund.

The Trust and its partners’ approach to administering its \$17 million grant award to community-based groups is one of 385 such initiatives made possible with a \$1 billion investment by the USDA’s Urban and

Community Forestry Program in all 50 states, two U.S. territories, three U.S. affiliated Pacific islands, and in several tribal communities. All programs are resourced by the Inflation Reduction Act and covered by the Justice40 Initiative, a priority established by the Biden Administration to ensure that at least 40% of overall benefits of Federal investments flow to disadvantaged communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution.

The Mid-Atlantic Environmental Justice Fund's website, portal, and resources hub will be launched in late 2023.

About the Chesapeake Bay Trust

The Chesapeake Bay Trust (www.cbtrust.org) envisions a restored, protected, and resilient Chesapeake Bay watershed and other natural resources in our area, from the Coastal Bays to the Chesapeake to the Youghiogheny River. The Trust empowers over 400 local community-based groups each year with the resources they need to take on a meaningful and measurable role in restoring forests, streams, rivers, bays, wildlife, and more in their own communities. The Trust is supported by the sale of the Chesapeake Bay license plate; donations from individuals and corporations; and partnerships with private foundations and federal, state, and local governments. The Trust has received the highest rating from Charity Navigator for over two decades. On average, 90% of the Trust's expenditures are directed to its restoration and education programs.

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