DELAWARE CENTER FOR THE INLAND BAYS
preserve • protect • restore

The Delaware Center for the Inland Bays
Strategic Plan
2026-2028

The Challenges Ahead

Delaware's Inland Bays and their watershed face two dominant pressures as we enter a new strategic planning horizon: sprawling development and the host of hazards created by accelerating changes in our climate.

More housing, roads, and other hardened infrastructure mean less wetlands, fewer mature forests, and lost open space. Loss of these critical habitats means lost plant and wildlife habitats, greater flood risks associated with increased impervious surfaces, reduced natural resilience, expedited pollution flows into waterways, and heightened vulnerability to more extreme weather events.

Changing climate brings more frequent storms, higher air and water temperatures, accelerating erosion and recurrent flooding. Together these changes threaten environmental and human health, property and the local economy.

Water quality remains a core concern as pollution-induced, cloudy waters make it far more difficult to re-establish bay grass beds and other critical habitats in the Inland Bays watershed and sustain the diversity of life those habitats support. Despite Sussex County's robust efforts to connect areas served by on-site wastewater treatment facilities to centralized sewer systems, on-site systems—many failing due to age and neglect—remain. And sewage spills from aging centralized wastewater treatment systems contribute to continuing water quality challenges in our Bays and waterways. Legacy actions such as salt marsh ditching excessive use of nitrogen-containing fertilizers continue to plague the ecosystem decades later. Land use changes and a warming climate further complicate efforts to reduce pollution as more severe rainfall events and more impervious surfaces accelerate the delivery of nitrogen, phosphorus and sediments into the Bays, further reducing water clarity and resilience.

What We Bring to the Table

With 30 years of work behind us the Center has:

- A clear understanding of the challenges facing the Inland Bays;

- Strong partnerships with agencies, communities, businesses, contractors, academics and conservation organizations; and
- A solid track record of implementing projects that move the needle.

This Strategic Plan builds on these strengths and on the many successes of the 2023-2025 period. These activities/capabilities and the accomplishments listed below illustrate the kind of work the Center will continue to accomplish and expand upon to meet the accelerating changes across our watershed.

- Reforestation and meadows:

The Center has expanded its reforestation and meadow-planting efforts, utilizing innovative techniques that increase plant survival. Over the past three years, Center staff, volunteers and other partners have planted 51 acres of land and strengthened community engagement through mini-forest and native meadow projects in homeowners' associations (HOAs) and other communities across the watershed.

- Oysters and living shorelines:

Staff, volunteers and contractors also built the first modern-day, and hopefully self-sustaining oyster reef in the Inland Bays off Pasture Point in the Indian River Bay—a boon to local water quality and foundational contributor to an anticipated living shoreline to protect the quickly eroding point. Coordinated effort also resulted in the installation—in partnership with the Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation—of nearly 600 linear feet of wave attenuation devices off the southern shore of Thompson Island as part of a comprehensive living shoreline project to protect a sacred, historic Native American site and nature preserve from erosion.

- Bays to Backyards and community resilience:

Recognizing that many solutions must happen at the neighborhood and the homeowner scale, the Center piloted the Bays to Backyards Community Engagement Program to help communities manage stormwater runoff, create habitat, support pollinators, conserve energy, and build collective resilience in shared open space. This strategic plan calls for formalizing and expanding that effort.

- James Farm education campus:

Completion of the $2.8 million education campus at James Farm Ecological Preserve dramatically expands the Center's ability to deliver hands-on, outdoor learning. Students now have access to microscopes, digital tools, and other technology that deepen their understanding of the Bays and coastal ecosystems.

- Volunteer power:

Reaching our goals has been and will always be dependent on cultivating and adding more key partners and volunteers to our team. The Center has strengthened and expanded its volunteer programs by implementing the Better Impact volunteer management system. This allows smoother registration, coordinated scheduling, better communication, and digital tracking of service hours. The volunteer base is now approaching 400 members. In 2025, volunteers accounted for more than 6,200 hours of service with an estimated value of $215,700. The Center also serves as a local organizing partner in the Delaware Master Naturalist program, harnessing the enthusiasm of over 50 trained and knowledgeable volunteers.

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- Science-based advocacy:

The Center's enabling legislation directs us to "oversee and facilitate the implementation of a long-term approach for the wise use and enhancement of the Inland Bays watershed" and to "recommend priority corrective actions and compliance schedules." To fulfill this mandate, the Center has adopted an advocacy policy to guide informed, science-based engagement with policymakers at all levels. Staff have played active roles in:

- Sussex County's Land Use Reform Working Group,
- Statewide land use discussions through the Rethinking Delaware coalition,
- The Shellfish Advisory Task Force,
- The Delaware Living Shoreline Committee, and
- The development of freshwater wetlands legislation.

- Funding and philanthropy:

The Center and fellow National Estuary Programs have been buoyed by strong, bipartisan support for continued Federal funding. Still, uncertainty about Federal funding support in 2025 created significant strain and staff turnover. In response, the Center created the Austin F. Okie Watershed Society to grow private support. Society members are donors whose cumulative giving exceeds $50,000; we are pleased to announce that three members have already joined, with more on the way.

These experiences shape how we approach the 2026–2028 period—and highlight what still needs to change.

What We're Missing

Despite strong progress, several gaps limit the Center's ability to respond at the scale and speed the moment requires:

- Scale and pace of work on-the-ground :

Our restoration and resilience projects are effective, but not yet at the acreage, linear feet, or number of communities needed to keep pace with development and climate impacts.

- Stable, diversified funding:

Federal and State funding remain essential but vulnerable to changing political winds, policy shifts and budget cycles. Private philanthropy, earned income, and local government partnerships are not yet robust enough to cushion major funding shocks.

- Internal capacity and systems:

As more daunting challenges require the Center to grow in staff, projects, and grants, our internal systems must evolve with us. Strengthening HR, compensation structures, performance management, data systems, IT tools, and standard operating procedures will help streamline operations, reduce turnover, and ensure staff have the support they need to thrive.

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- Coordinated community resilience work:

Our watershed community is concerned about flooding, erosion, water quality, and habitat loss, but lacks shared plans, practical tools, or funding pathways to act. The Center's resilience work is promising but not yet fully defined, scaled, or resourced.

- Research and innovation platform:

The Inland Bays offer a unique, compact "laboratory" for global questions about climate, coasts, and communities. However, we do not yet have the partnerships, infrastructure, or funding to position the Bays as a potential global hub for climate and estuary science.

What We Plan to Do

In response, this 2026–2028 Strategic Plan focuses on four integrated goals:

- Build Resilience Through Restoration and Protection of Natural Systems

Scale up reforestation, meadows, bay grasses, oysters, living shorelines, marsh restoration, and water-quality work to protect communities, habitats, and the local economy.

- Educate, Engage, and Empower Communities

Expand education, outreach, and Bays to Backyards–style programs so that residents, neighborhoods, towns, and businesses can make informed decisions and take practical actions to build resilience.

- Strengthen the Core

Invest in people, systems, and infrastructure—HR, compensation, culture, finance, IT, communications, standard operating procedures—so the Center can deliver high-quality work, retain talent, and weather funding shocks.

- Lead Through Innovation

Explore the feasibility of a Delaware Inland Bays–based Center for Climate and Estuary Science and maintain state-of-the-art scientific methods, monitoring, and data practices.

Mission, Vision and Values

Given quickening and harmful impacts of development and climate trends, the Center revisited its Vision and Mission in preparing this strategic plan. The Center's Core Values are unchanged from those identified in the FY 2023-2025 strategic plan.

Vision Statement:

The Delaware Center for the Inland Bays envisions a future where communities and nature thrive together—where healthy ecosystems, resilient shorelines, and sustainable economies grow side by side through thoughtful

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planning and respect for the natural world. By fostering collaboration among governments, businesses, scientists, and residents, we will promote responsible development that protects water quality, conserves wild lands and wetlands, and strengthens our shared resilience to a changing climate. Through innovation and a commitment to nature-based and science-driven solutions, Delaware can stand as a model for how growth and conservation move forward together—sustaining the Bays, the people, and the places that make them extraordinary.

Mission Statement:

The Delaware Center for the Inland Bays works to preserve, protect, and restore Delaware's Inland Bays and their watershed through science, education, advocacy, and action. We bring together communities, businesses, governments, and partners to advance nature-based and responsible development solutions that enhance water quality, sustain wildlife habitat, and strengthen the resilience of our coastal communities. Guided by collaboration and innovation, we strive to ensure that the Bays remain healthy, vibrant, and accessible for generations to come.

Organizational Core Values:

✧ Connected to Nature ✧ Integrity ✧ Balance ✧ Optimism ✧ Collaboration and Teamwork ✧
✧ Respect ✧ Empowerment ✧ Environmental Stewardship ✧ Equity ✧ Trust ✧ Inclusion ✧

Priorities and Future Focus

The Center's primary focus is to ensure it has the institutional strength, financial resources, committed partnerships, and public trust needed to help communities thrive in the face of rapid change.

Over the 2026–2028 period, we will:

- Prioritize projects that build resilience for vulnerable communities, while protecting habitats and improving water quality.
- Align education, outreach, and volunteer programs directly with measurable restoration and resilience outcomes.
- Strengthen internal capacity through transparent compensation, staff development, and modern operational systems.
- Diversify funding to reduce reliance on Federal sources and grow sustaining State, County and private support.
- Use the best available science and community insight to guide decisions and resource allocation.

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- Demonstrate resilience in our operations through strong planning, communication, and stewardship practices.

These priorities are reflected in the four strategic goals and their associated objectives and targets that follow.

Strategic Goals and Objectives

Four interdependent goals provide the foundation for this strategic plan.

The strategic goals are:

- Build Resilience Through Restoration and Protection of Natural Systems
- Educate, Engage, and Empower Communities
- Strengthen the Core
- Lead Through Innovation

Goal One: Build Resilience and Preserve Ecosystem Functions Through Restoration and Protection of Natural Systems

Ensure that tidal and nontidal wetlands, reefs, bay grass meadows, living shorelines, and forested/meadowed lands support coastal community well-being, estuarine ecosystems, and local economies by providing raw materials and food, coastal protection, erosion control, water purification, maintenance of fisheries, carbon storage, as well as tourism, recreation, and educational benefits.

Objectives:

1. Achieve greater community resilience through partnerships to address a changing climate and associated rising sea levels, eroding shorelines, community flooding, and the loss of essential ecosystem services that sustain and protect life, property and prosperity.

    Target – Complete an Inland Bays watershed resilience vision statement and work with one new community to strengthen local resilience. (FY 2026)

    Target – Complete an Inland Bays watershed resilience strategic plan. (FY 2028)

    Target – Work with partners to establish Statewide, Sussex County and municipal climate resilience funds to support resilience-building projects. (FY 2026-2028)

2. Increase native plantings such as forest canopy, tree cover and meadow acreage throughout the Inland Bays watershed to assist with heat island issues, reduce stormwater runoff, mitigate flooding, improve plant and wildlife habitat quality, reduce nutrient and sediment loading into nearby waterways, boost property values, and otherwise improve community resilience and quality of life.

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Target – Increase reforested acreage in the Inland Bays watershed by 60 acres by FY 2028.

Target – Plant 10 acres of meadows (native, non-woody species such as grasses and wildflowers) by FY 2028 in areas where reforestation is not an option or where such plantings best meet ecological needs or community interests.

Target – Continue to support large-acre reforestation projects on Sussex County-owned land. (FY 2026-2028)

Target – Partner with five communities in each of FY 2026, 2027 and 2028 to restore abandoned wastewater drainfields, establish mini-forests, convert lawns to trees and/or meadows.

Target – Minimize the use of turf grass (lawns) in new developments and in existing communities by incorporating this goal into Bays to Backyards community partnerships and partnering with the Delaware Agriculture Extension Service, the Delaware Department of Agriculture's Nutrient Management Commission, the Sussex County Conservation District, the Sussex Preservation Coalition, developers and others to increase public awareness of the many ecological benefits to alternative community and homeowner planting strategies.

Target – Increase the number of continuous perimeter vegetative buffers by 10 percent over FY 2020 levels; at least 50 percent of new vegetative buffers should be at least 50 feet wide. (FY 2028)

3. Strengthen wise land use decision-making and the protection of open space at the State and County levels to protect key habitats, increase climate resilience, manage stormwater and maintain water quality.

Target – In partnership with the Delaware Land Protection Coalition, seek an additional $10 million/year in Open Space Council funding for land and easement acquisition. (each year FY 2026-2028)

Target – Allow access (with sufficient funding) to Open Space Council funding by local governments and conservation organizations for land and easement acquisition. (FY 2026-2028)

Target – Support continued and increased Sussex County investments in land acquisition and protection. (FY 2026-2028)

Target – Continue to partner with Sussex County to ensure full and expedited implementation of Land Use Reform Work Group recommendations and provide comments on proposed ordinance and comprehensive plan changes related to the Work Group's work. (FY 2026-2028)

Target – Develop a land use policy document based on the Land Use Reform Working Group's recommendations that explains why those recommendations as a whole are important to the health

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and well-being of the Inland Bays watershed and its natural and human communities and should be fully implemented. (FY 2026)

Target – Ensure all Center research, reports and other documents relevant to the impact of development on the Inland Bays watershed are available on the Center's website or otherwise accessible. (FY 2026)

Target – Continue the Center's work with the Rethinking Delaware coalition to ensure wise State-level land use policy and to promote coordination and cooperation among the State, counties and municipalities that will enable sustainable development in Sussex County and throughout the State of Delaware. (FY 2026-2028)

4. Expand bay grass meadows in the Inland Bays to improve water quality, sequester carbon, provide key habitat for fish and shellfish, reduce wave energy impacting watershed shorelines, and otherwise mitigate climate impacts.

    Target – Continue to identify and characterize potential bay grass restoration sites. (FY 2026-2027)

    Target – Resurvey known bay grass populations and expand surveys to areas of potential suitable habitat (last done in 2020-2021) (FY 2026-2027)

    Target – Establish sustainable bay grass meadows (3-5 acres total) where water quality conditions permit. (FY 2026-2028)

    Target – Establish a freshwater bay grass nursery to ensure a reliable source of seed for planting. (FY 2026-2027)

5. Expand oyster reef populations to establish a self-sustaining population of wild oysters in the Inland Bays that will increase shoreline resilience, establish important aquatic plant and animal habitat, and improve water quality.

    Target – Install a second large reef complex. (FY 2027)

    Target – Negotiate with DNREC to further reduce long-term subaqueous lease costs for research and restoration projects. (FY 2026)

    Target – Grow or otherwise obtain more oysters to seed onto reefs. (FY 2026-2028)

    Target – Facilitate oyster reproduction and spat recruitment to targeted habitats to increase oyster reef sustainability. (FY 2026-2028)

6. Expand deployment of living shorelines that serve as resilient protection for vulnerable shores while providing critical coastal habitats and reducing pollutant flows into the Bays and tributaries.

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Target – Monitor existing living shoreline projects to determine shoreline stability, wildlife use, and revegetation. Consider adding sediment accretion measures to monitoring plans. (FY 2026-2028)

Target – Develop, assess, design and fund 2,500 linear feet of living shorelines. (FY 2026-2028)

Target – Fund Thompson Island living shoreline project Phases 2 and 3. (FY 2026-2028)

Target – Develop a James Farm Shoreline Living Shoreline Assessment and Management Plan. (FY 2026-2027)

Target – Implement the James Farm Shoreline Protection Plan. (FY 2028)

7. Ensure and expand the capacity of tidal marshes to protect habitats, homes, businesses, communities, public health and the economy from flooding associated with rising sea levels, storm surges and eroding shorelines.

   Target – Create a system to prioritize tidal marsh restoration projects in the Inland Bays based on marsh condition, ecological values, flood-protection benefits, and adjacency to sources of appropriate marsh-building sediments.

   Target – Locate and fund project planning for at least 10 acres of tidal marsh restoration. (FY 2026-2028)

   Target – Partner with DNREC and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to identify opportunities to beneficially use dredged material to enhance or create tidal marshes. (FY 2026-2028)

   Target – Prioritize long-term tidal marsh monitoring by expanding the number of sediment elevation table (SET) platforms. (FY 2027)

8. Continue to assess and mitigate the causes of persistent Inland Bays water quality challenges—a continuing strain on watershed life and constraint on ecosystem-restoration efforts such as establishing and expanding bay grass beds.

   Target – Continue to monitor estuary water quality metrics as part of the Center's long-term trend analysis. (FY 2026-2028)

   Target – Complete wastewater nutrient loading budget and white paper. (FY 2027)

   Target – Work with DNREC to assess the utility of the newly developed Delaware Targeting and Planning Tool (DTAP) in better understanding pollutant loading in the Delaware Inland Bays watershed. (FY 2026)

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Target – Depending on the results of the DTAP assessment, determine the feasibility of undertaking a meaningful investigation of groundwater sources and fates affecting the Inland Bays estuary's water quality. (FY 2027)

Target – Characterize identified low dissolved oxygen zones to determine how widespread they are spatially and how much of the water column is affected. (FY 2026-2028)

Goal Two: Educate, Engage, Empower Communities

Work with watershed residents, businesses, and all others who use the watershed to identify their challenges, anticipate their futures, and increase their capacity to meet coming changes. In doing so, cultivate an informed and engaged public that understands climate risks, helps find solutions, and takes part in building resilient communities and habitats throughout the Inland Bays watershed.

Objectives

1. Utilize the James Farm Ecological Preserve to enhance education and engagement with southern Delaware audiences.

   Target – Document an increase in the number of Sussex, Delaware-wide, national and global communities reflected among James Farm visitors. (FY 2026-2027)

   Target – Deliver nature-based education to 2,000 students annually. (FY 2026-2028)

   Target – Provide public education opportunities to 1,500 intergenerational audience members annually. (FY 2026-2028)

   Target – Provide professional development for teachers on learner-centered approaches to investigating local environmental issues, and track participant feedback to ensure that workshops enhance teacher confidence and classroom application. (FY 2026-2027)

   Target – Establish a greenhouse at the James Farm to propagate plants to distribute at the Native Plant Sale and/or for use in restoration projects. (FY 2027-2028)

   Target – Implement the interpretive signage and wayfinding Master Plan. (FY 2026-2027)

2. Increase the number of constituents reached across the watershed, with an emphasis on new populations.

   Target – Reach 45,000 people annually through a combination of speaking engagements, events, online platforms (social media and the website), and publications. (FY 2028)

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Target – Strengthen community capacity for environmental stewardship through the Bays to Backyards program by tracking resident and HOA participation, adoption of recommended practices, and engagement with program resources and educational opportunities. (FY 2026–2028)

Target – Engage 300 community members annually in a meaningful experience with the Center through the volunteer and participatory science programs with an emphasis on face-to-face presentations, events, and opportunities. (FY 2026-2028)

Target –- Provide professional development opportunities for students and community members by participating in internships and scientific research that contribute to the stewardship of the Bays. (FY 2026-2028)

3. Achieve community-focused resilience by working with home and business owners to build awareness, identify solutions, and deploy their collective wisdom to manage weather and climate-related hazards.

Target – Develop community-based resilience projects that support the goals of the Inland Bays watershed resilience vision (e.g., flood reduction, preventing habitat loss, mitigating erosion, maintaining and improving water quality). (FY 2026-2027)

Target – Develop a climate resilience education and outreach strategy. (FY 2027)

Goal Three: Strengthen the Core

The Center must ensure that the people carrying out the work are set up to succeed. This includes providing the internal structure and systems that allow the Center to partner effectively, deliver quality work, show results transparently, and build its resilience to mirror the environmental resilience the Center promotes.

Objectives:

1. Ensure HR, compensation, culture and workforce stability to establish a solid foundation for staff and Center.

Target – Review and update all job descriptions, including consistent formatting and alignment with current and anticipated organizational needs, and establish a job description library to promote transparency, internal mobility, and long-term talent development. (FY 2026)

Target – Build a full pay-grade system with formal pay grades, salary bands, and placement rules for Delaware pay transparency. (FY 2026)

Target – Review/update performance review system aligned with job descriptions and pay grades. (FY 2026)

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Target – Strengthen culture and reduce turnover by identifying turnover drivers and implementing targeted culture interventions. (rollout in FY 2027; refine in FY 2028)

Target – Build staffing stability by filling critical vacancies. (FY 2026-2027)

2. Establish a Center-wide team approach to meeting each of the goals, objectives and target actions identified in this strategic plan—ensuring the application of all the talent required to succeed, from project planning, partnership building, fundraising, public engagement, volunteer mobilization, storytelling and marketing.

   Target – For each target action, envision the story the Center wants to tell about the project, assess financial and human resources required to complete the action, develop the pitch required to cultivate the funding and policy changes needed, and complete a plan of action (including timeline). (FY 2026-2027)

   Target – For each target action, identify Center staff who would comprise the project team. (FY 2026-2027)

   Target – Develop the appropriate budget and accounting methodology needed to allocate staff time and funding resources to support completion of each project. (FY 2026)

3. Strengthen finance and program management systems with operational controls that support compliance, transparency, and efficiency, including standardized grant management, documentation and reporting tools, and cross-functional communication that allow the Center to partner effectively, deliver quality work, and show results transparently.

   Target – Standardize grant management through implementation of unified procedures for grant initiation, documentation, reporting, coding, and closeout. (FY 2028)

   Target – Develop organization-wide reporting templates. (FY 2026)

   Target – Establish monthly or bi-monthly communications between programs, finance, and development. (FY 2026)

   Target – Strengthen finance capacity by assessing, updating, and—if necessary—replacing the Center's accounting software, financial reporting tools, and related infrastructure to support accurate grant tracking, budgeting, and audits. (FY 2026)

4. Complete communications strategy, realistic marketing scope, and brand updates.

   Target – Build a comprehensive brand, development and communications playbook(s) including brand voice, personality, colors, typefaces, naming conventions ("the Center," capitalization of Bays), templates, and examples. (FY 2026)

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Target – Complete/update outdated Program Branding (e.g., Don't Chuck Your Shucks). (FY 2026-2027)

Target – Set realistic development/marketing capacity and priorities by defining 3-5 achievable development marketing priorities aligned with staff bandwidth. (CY 2026)

Target – Budget for and procure branding materials, including signage, apparel, decals, printed materials, templates, environmental graphics, program materials. (FY 2026-2027)

5. Strengthen organizational infrastructure, systems and processes such as the Human Resources Information System (HRIS), Google shared drive, annual operating cycles, and standard operating procedures to create the organizational resilience that mirrors the environmental resilience the Center promotes.

   Target – Establish a standardized structure for all organizational record-keeping systems—including the HRIS, Google Drive, physical paper files, and core IT infrastructure—ensuring consistent file organization, access permissions, retention practices, cybersecurity settings, and automated backup protocols. (CY 2026)

   Target – Establish a standard annual operating cycle covering budgeting, performance reviews, grant reporting, program cycles, communications calendar, recruitment timelines, and major events tracked by a published annual cycle visual chart and calendar. (CY 2027)

   Target – Develop 6-10 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for essential functions including recruitment, onboarding, procurement, grant tracking, communications review, program reporting, event planning, and financial workflows. (CY 2026-2027)

   Target – Provide staff training, documentation, and support so employees can effectively use the HRIS, shared drive, communications templates, Google Workspace tools, IT systems, and all organizational SOPs. (CY 2026-2028)

6. Employ the Board member's unique skills, abilities, and prominence to enhance implementation of the Strategic Plan.

   Target – Conduct a Board orientation focused on the Strategic Plan and identifying best opportunities to advance relevant goals, objectives and actions. (CY 2026)

   Target – Arrange such trainings as may be helpful for Board members to advance elements of the Strategic Plan. (CY 2026-2027)

   Target – Engage Board members to assist with Sussex County Council, State General Assembly, and public advocacy on behalf of relevant Strategic Plan elements. (CY 2026-2028)

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Target – Develop—with the assistance of Board members—stories to illustrate Strategic Plan goals and objectives and to serve as a unified basis of the Center's Board's, staff's and committees' collective outreach and advocacy. (CY 2026)

Target – Facilitate the Board's annual review of progress on the Strategic Plan. (CY 2026-2028)

Target – Ensure Board access to appropriate Center materials. (CY 2026)

Goal Four: Lead Through Innovation

Promote the unique and globally relevant research opportunities offered by the Inland Bays' unique and compact watershed to establish a Center for Climate and Estuary Science (final name TBD) to position Southern Delaware's Inland Bays estuary as a global hub for estuarine research.

Objectives:

1. Reach out to leading climate and estuarine researchers and major environmental, natural resource, scientific research and climate-oriented foundations to assess the feasibility of establishing an Inland Bay-based climate and estuary science research center .

   Target – Survey prominent members of the estuarine and climate research community as well as natural resource and behavioral economists, cultural anthropologists, and others in the behavioral sciences on the value of a center focused on climate and estuary science research and related economic and human behavioral issues focused on a small, 400-square-mile, mid-Atlantic estuarine watershed. (FY 2027)

   Target – Determine the nature and magnitude of incentives (funding, infrastructure, e.g., office space, laboratory capabilities, living accommodations) needed to attract top researchers to an Inland Bay-based climate and estuary science research center. (FY 2027)

   Target – Develop a concept for a Delaware Inland Bays-based Center for Climate and Estuary Science, based on an assessment of perceived need, level of interest, estimated costs and feasibility and pitch to major environmental, natural resource, scientific research and climate-oriented foundations and donors. (FY 2028)

2. Maintain state-of-the-art scientific methods and capabilities to maximize success in addressing the Center's strategic goals.

   Target – Understand and certify the amount of carbon sequestered through nature-based restoration projects either through modeling (e.g., i-Tree) or through direct measurement (e.g., soil carbon). (FY 2026-2027)

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Target – Perform yearly quality assurance and quality control (QA/QC) documentation and ensure Quality Assurance Project Plan compliance for all research and monitoring projects. (FY 2026-2028)

Target – Ensure at least three years of structural monitoring and one year of efficacy monitoring after construction of all new restoration projects (more years if required by permit) and apply that knowledge to future projects. (FY 2026-2028)

How This Strategic Plan Advances the CCMP

The goals in this Strategic Plan directly advance the 2021 Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan—the federally approved roadmap for restoring and protecting Delaware's Inland Bays. The CCMP establishes the actions needed to improve water quality, conserve and rebuild vital habitats, promote responsible land use, address climate risks, and engage communities in stewardship. Our Strategic Plan builds the organizational strength required to carry out that work. By expanding restoration capacity, strengthening science and monitoring, deepening public engagement, modernizing internal systems, innovating, and securing diverse and stable funding, the Center is positioning itself to deliver consistent, measurable progress on every CCMP core element.

Just as importantly, this Strategic Plan ensures that the Center can meet its statutory responsibility to coordinate CCMP implementation across agencies, local governments, nonprofits, research institutions, and the public. Strengthened operations, transparent reporting, enhanced communications, and collaborative project planning all directly support the CCMP's call for unified action across the watershed. Together, the CCMP and this Strategic Plan form a cohesive framework: the CCMP defines what the Bays need, and the Strategic Plan defines how the Center will lead, partner, and invest to make that vision real. Through this alignment, the Center is prepared to safeguard the health, resilience, and extraordinary value of the Inland Bays for generations to come.

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