



Virginia Conservation Network Response to the 2020 General Assembly Special Session and the 2021-22 Biennium Budgets

Your charge during this special session of the General Assembly is a weighty one -- address the immediate demands of a public health crisis, continue the hard work of dismantling racial inequities in the Commonwealth, and secure the essential needs of our communities. This pandemic has made it clear that among those essential needs are clean air, clean water, equitable access to the outdoors, and access to transportation alternatives.

As you take up the 2021-2022 Biennium Budget, please remember that investments in our natural resources and transportation will not only further Virginia's long-standing policy goals -- these investments will help relieve the economic and health-related impacts of our prolonged battle with this pandemic (read more at vcnva.org/specialsession). To that end, we urge you to maintain the following in the budget presented to you by Governor Northam on August 18th.

- Item 125 - Provides for the establishment of the Office of Offshore Wind at the Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy.
- Item 373 - Provides \$15 million for rehabilitation of state-owned dams, \$3.84 million in supplemental Water Quality Improvement Funding (WQIF) for agricultural best management practices in 2021, and the statutorily required WQIF deposit in 2022.
- Item 374 - Restores \$5.5 million each year for the Virginia Land Conservation Fund for a total of \$10 million per year, the amount approved by the General Assembly in March.
- Item 430 - Provides funding flexibility to the Commonwealth Transportation Board that will help avoid project delays and cuts to transit and passenger rail service.
- Item 443 - Allows the Department of Rail and Public Transportation to continue to advance the Virginia Rail Initiative while the newly-authorized Virginia Passenger Rail Authority is established.
- Item 444 - Allows the Department of Rail and Public Transportation to keep its budget at current levels.
- Item C-70 - Provides \$50 million for Nutrient Removal Grants to wastewater treatment facilities, \$50 million for Stormwater Local Assistance Funding, and \$25 million to address Alexandria's Combined Sewer System.
- Item C-54 - Provides \$10 million for oyster reef restoration.

We further urge you to include \$200,000 for the establishment of a director of environmental justice at the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). It is no coincidence that communities of color, who have long suffered the lasting health impacts of air and water pollution, are among the hardest hit by this pandemic. Thanks to the leadership of this General Assembly, we have made significant progress towards advancing environmental justice and securing the benefits of Virginia's environmental protections for all communities. But this progress will be lost without dedicated leadership at DEQ charged with turning plans into action and holding the agency accountable. This is a small slice of what is needed to restore decades of cuts to DEQ, but it is a critical slice to guarantee progress on ensuring our most vulnerable populations are protected from pollution -- particularly during this time.

We do not make these requests lightly. Virginia must balance its budget while protecting the countless households struggling to make ends meet during this recession. That's why we

further urge you to support language amendments to the budget bill that will help address the economic burdens our Commonwealth is facing.

- Item 372 - Study and development of a plan to require landfill operators to pay a solid waste disposal fee for each ton of solid waste received at a landfill. Other states use such fees as a dedicated funding source for natural resources, and it is time for Virginia to consider doing the same.
- Item 4-14 - Prohibiting utility providers from disconnecting service for non-payment of bills or fees until at least 60 days after the declared state of emergency ends.

We ask that you consider clarifying Item 4-14 to 1) further prevent utilities from adding late fees or carrying charges to the arrearage and 2) address the needs of customers with pre-pay billing plans.

Together, and with your leadership, we have already made significant progress to secure clean air, clean water, access to natural landscapes, and access to cleaner transportation options across the Commonwealth because we know how critical these resources are to the health and economic well-being of all communities. During these unprecedented times, with public health, racial justice, and restored prosperity at stake, we must continue that work as we strive towards a more equitable and just Virginia.

For more information or any questions you may have, please do not hesitate to reach out to the following advocates in the conservation community:

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Founded as the Conservation Council of Virginia in 1969, Virginia Conservation Network (VCN) began as a roundtable of major conservation groups and has grown to include over 130 Network Partners across the Commonwealth. VCN is committed to building a powerful, diverse, and highly-coordinated conservation movement focused on protecting our Commonwealth's natural resources today and for tomorrow.