

CONSERVING VIRGINIA'S LANDSCAPES FOR THE FUTURE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virginia is known for its iconic landscapes - the rugged mountains of Southwest, the fertile Shenandoah Valley, Piedmont's rolling hills, and Tidewater's marshlands. In early 2020, when our world shut down, Virginians gained a renewed appreciation for close-to-home parks, trails, natural areas, and farms.

These much-loved open spaces did not happen by accident. They are a direct result of public investment in land protection.

Meeting our needs for the future - farmland to support resilient food systems and vitalize rural economies, equitable access to urban parks and trails, protected areas for tourism and recreation - requires a recommitment to preserving the resources on which all Virginians depend.

CHALLENGE

Climate change and population growth are putting pressure on our state's natural and agricultural lands. Since 2000, more than 335,000 acres of Virginia farmland have been paved over or otherwise converted to non-agricultural uses.¹

These lands grow our food, protect reliable drinking water supplies, preserve habitat for wildlife, sequester carbon, and provide healthy outdoor spaces for Virginia families.

Despite broad public support for parks and conserved landscapes, the state's land protection programs are chronically underfunded. Conservation organizations and localities across the state submitted over \$100 million in land and water protection projects to a grant program with a budget of only \$14 million.

The federal government is making a significant, new investment in land conservation through the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund.

If state and local matching funds are not provided to unlock these federal dollars, Virginia could miss out.

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Underserved communities across Virginia have historically been unable to access available conservation resources. Missing opportunities to support these communities due to a lack of financial resources and the need for new targeted programming has meant that these areas lack access to the tremendous benefit that outdoor recreation and park investments provide.

Finally, statewide ranking of conservation areas through the new Conserve Virginia model² has generally been inadequate in reflecting locally-led conservation priorities across Virginia's vastly diverse regions and landscapes.

SOLUTION

Fortunately, the Commonwealth has effective land conservation programs already in place, but they must be supported consistently at much higher levels to meet the growing need.

Virginia has one of the most successful and progressive private land conservation programs in the country - the Land Preservation Tax Credit (LPTC). The LPTC encourages voluntary land conservation by providing taxpayers who make gifts of land or conservation easements tax credits equal to 40% of the value of their donated interest.

The Virginia Land Conservation Foundation (VLCF) provides state matching grants on a competitive basis for the protection of open spaces and parks, natural areas, historic areas, and farmland and forest preservation.

The Virginia Farmland Preservation Fund and Virginia Battlefield Preservation Fund provide matching funds to leverage significant local, federal and private funding sources to protect the state's best farmland, tell a more complete history, and preserve historically-significant places.

These proven and effective tools must be funded robustly to meet the demands of our time.

In addition, these essential programs must be augmented by a permanent, dedicated source of revenue that serves a wider array of outdoor recreation, trails, pocket parks, and cultural site expansion and development projects. Such a program that supports urban conservation and underserved communities with a sustained source or reliable funds will allow localities to better plan their outdoor recreation infrastructure investments with certainty that their needs will be met. One potential way to build this new program out of an existing tool is to build off of the Virginia Outdoor Foundation's Preservation Trust Fund and new Get Outdoors program.³

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Land Preservation Tax Credit (LPTC)

No changes should be made to the LPTC, a proven and effective land conservation tool

Virginia's Land Conservation Grant Programs

\$40 million for the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation

\$5 million for the Virginia Farmland Preservation Fund

\$5 million for the Virginia Battlefield Preservation Fund

New Outdoor Recreation Community Access Fund

\$50 million to be administered as a new statewide initiative



Mentee at Ravens Roost - Blue Ridge Parkway

Image credit: Freddy Jackson