

ENSURING THE RESILIENCE OF VIRGINIA'S FLOOD-PRONE COMMUNITIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virginians are already seeing the impacts of climate change across the state, from sea level rise along our coastlines to increased rainfall statewide. We must build upon the leadership of recent years to protect Virginians and preserve our natural resources into the future. Although all communities will undoubtedly face tough decisions, chronically underserved communities face disproportionate risks. Community-engaged comprehensive resilience planning and careful investment in adaptation measures will ensure an equitable future for all Virginians as well as the preservation of our natural resources.

CHALLENGE

Virginians are on the frontlines of climate change. Coastal Virginia faces the highest rate of relative sea-level rise on the East Coast.¹ Rainfall intensity is also increasing, threatening coastal, inland, and riverine communities.² This places Virginia's residents at risk and threatens the future of our coastal wetlands and shorelines. Sea level rise and increasing water temperatures threaten to set back decades-long investment in Virginia's Chesapeake Bay and vital coastal ecosystems including the commitment to "no net loss" of wetlands. The chronically underserved and under-resourced communities least able to adapt, plan, and invest in preparedness and protection face the greatest risks from climate change while simultaneously facing compound threats of discrimination.

In recent years, Virginia's leadership has taken important steps to reduce flood risk and build flood resilience. Virginia joined the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative and designated 45% of proceeds to the statewide Community Flood Preparedness Fund, with 25% set aside for low-income geographic areas, providing communities access to critically needed funds.

Virginia has undertaken many initiatives to increase coastal protection and plan for climate change and will release a Coastal Resilience Master Plan by the end of 2021. Virginia is the first state to include sea level rise in its tidal wetlands permitting and the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act.

Some communities have identified billions of dollars in needed resilience investments, while many have not yet begun to calculate the costs. Virginia cannot lose momentum, and must ensure that this vital work continues with the next Governor and General Assembly.

Virginia could lose much of its tidal wetlands and coastal shoreline by mid-century unless we act now.

SOLUTION

Climate change and flooding impact the entire Commonwealth. An equitable and comprehensive approach to flood resilience is needed to protect Virginia's people, places, and resources.

Future resilience planning and programs must be statewide, science-based, inclusive, and ongoing. Mandates for inclusion of climate change impacts in our environmental programs and regulations must be implemented and the involvement of frontline communities must be prioritized. Virginia could lose much of its tidal wetlands and coastal shoreline by mid-century unless we act now to vigorously enforce newly-developed regulations to protect them. Increased riverine flooding threatens the gains we have made on water quality. This argues for continued statewide allocation of resources from the Community Flood Preparedness Fund, with emphasis on nature-based solutions and priority given to low-income Virginians.

We must also ensure transparency and oversight of these resources and continue to prioritize identification of additional sources of funding and financing strategies to support communities as they build capacity and implement resilience solutions.

Communities are already and will continue to experience the negative impacts of flooding. Many impacted Virginians do not have the capacity to protect their homes, businesses, property, and natural resources from repeated flooding. We must work not only on large-scale infrastructure, but also to protect the lives and livelihoods of families and communities.

Finally, limited resources and climate reality necessitate that dialogue begin now to ensure the equitable and cost-effective protection and adaptation of our environment and communities in the future, including consideration of meaningful managed retreat.

Marsh Sunset - Fort Monroe, Va

Image credit: Lori A Cash

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Protect advances on resilience by codifying administrative initiatives, including operation and governance of the Community Flood Preparedness Fund, extension of the Coastal Resilience Master Plan to a statewide plan revised every four years, and adequate resources and talent to maintain and advance comprehensive resilience strategies.

Support policies and funding to protect families and communities, especially underserved and under-resourced communities, increasing community resilience statewide.

Include climate change and resulting impacts in all localities' comprehensive plans to ensure a future that includes equity for all Virginians and continued protection of our natural resources.

