EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Enhanced efforts are needed to upgrade Virginia’s wastewater facilities and to address the public health risk of combined sewer overflows from aging wastewater infrastructure. Upgrades to wastewater facilities are a proven strategy for benefiting water quality and reducing large quantities of pollution. Virginia’s wastewater agencies have played a major role in reducing nutrient pollution to date, but they have been asked to accelerate this important work in the Phase III Watershed Implementation Plan (Phase III WIP) and through recent legislation requiring upgrades to wastewater treatment and to remaining combined sewer overflow (CSO) systems. Virginia needs to support these programs to continue protecting water quality and public health.

CHALLENGE
In the last decade and a half, many of Virginia’s wastewater treatment plants have adopted upgraded nutrient removal technology to significantly reduce the pollution discharged to local rivers and the Bay. Additionally, a bill passed in 2017 required the City of Alexandria to remediate its CSO system by 2025, and the General Assembly has also assisted localities with remediating aging CSO systems, once again making local rivers swimmable and fishable. Virginia’s largest Combined Sewer Overflow system is located in the City of Richmond, where 24.5% of residents are below the poverty line and already pay some of the highest wastewater rates in Virginia. The work is not complete, however. Our watersheds have more people, fewer forests, and are facing climate change. As a result, Virginia and regional partners will have to enhance efforts to meet the goal of a restored Bay. Virginia’s plan to do so is set out in the Blueprint for clean water, which addresses the work needed by all sectors. Further, Virginia must rise to the challenge of addressing its largest CSO system located in the City of Richmond, where 24.5% of residents are below the poverty line and already pay some of the highest wastewater rates in Virginia.

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SOLUTION
The General Assembly placed Richmond on a timeline to remediate its CSO system by 2035 through legislation (SB1064) passed in 2020. In 2021, the Enhanced Nutrient Removal Certainty Program (HB 2129/SB1354) was established, which will ensure Virginia achieves the wastewater treatment technology upgrades necessary to meet the Blueprint goals. Still, the funding to implement these projects is critical to accomplishing these goals.

Not only will more complete wastewater treatment revitalize the Bay and its tributaries, but it will ensure that communities across the Commonwealth will more equitably receive the benefits of clean water in their own communities. Rural communities, especially rural communities of color, “have long faced challenges with toxic water due to insufficient water infrastructure,” while low income ratepayers in urban areas struggle to afford wastewater and drinking water improvements. State investment will help these communities maintain and improve aging infrastructure, prevent local water quality problems like toxic algae, and create jobs for skilled workers.

Based on Virginia’s latest needs assessment for the wastewater sector, Virginia will require an additional $150 million at least to meet our goals under the Chesapeake Bay Blueprint. Implementing Richmond’s interim plan to remediate its CSO system will also require significant state investment to supplement local ratepayer-generated fees.

CONCLUSION
Virginia legislators have enacted a suite of programs along with consistent funding through the Water Quality Improvement Fund to help the wastewater sector cost-effectively reduce pollution to Virginia’s waterways. The General Assembly has also assisted localities with remediating aging CSO systems, once again making local rivers swimmable and fishable. Virginia must remain committed to this work by ensuring robust and sustained funding for continued modernization of the Commonwealth’s wastewater infrastructure.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
Provide at least $150 million per year for Wastewater Needs Assessment for upgrading the nutrient pollution reduction capabilities of significant wastewater facilities discharging to the Chesapeake Bay and tributaries. Defend against any legislation that would prevent the Department of Environmental Quality from implementing wastewater treatment plant upgrades as called for in Virginia’s Chesapeake Bay Blueprint. Provide state resources to help Richmond fully address its CSO system, an estimated cost of $883 million, as required by SB1064 (2020).