

ADDRESSING STATEWIDE FLOOD RISK EQUITABLY

Jay Ford // Chesapeake Bay Foundation // jford@cbf.org
Emily Steinhilber // Environmental Defense Fund // esteinhilber@edf.org
Skip Stiles // Wetlands Watch // skip.stiles@wetlandswatch.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virginians are already seeing climate change impacts, from sea level rise along our coastlines to increased rainfall and flooding statewide. Over the past several years, state leaders have created new policies and programs to address increasing flood risk. Moving forward, we must ensure the involvement of low-income, rural, and tribal communities in flood-prone areas from the start. Given the cost of adaptation, consistent, long-term, and dedicated funding with transparent oversight must be identified. To ensure a flood resilient future for all Virginians, we need coordinated and equitable flood resilience planning and adaptation with adequate oversight and natural resource protections.

CHALLENGE

Climate-induced flooding threatens the lives, livelihoods, and property of communities across the Commonwealth. Coastal Virginia faces the highest rate of relative sea level rise on the Atlantic coast.¹ Without action, up to 89% of Virginia's coastal wetlands could be permanently inundated by 2080.² Within the next 60 years, nearly 1 million coastal Virginians will be at risk of major coastal flooding and face flood damages costing up to \$5.7 billion annually.³ Increased flooding threatens the gains we have made on water quality and the long term investment in a restored Chesapeake Bay. 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, leadership has taken important steps to reduce flood risk and build flood resilience. Virginia joined the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) in 2020 and designated 45% of proceeds to the statewide Community Flood Preparedness Fund,⁴ with 25% dedicated to low-income geographic areas. This fund, which prioritizes community scale investments and natural infrastructure, has already invested over \$70 million in flood resilience across the Commonwealth. It is increasingly oversubscribed and there is the potential for Virginia to withdraw from RGGI with no concrete plan to replace that funding.

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

SOLUTION

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

The continued prioritization and involvement of low-income, rural, and tribal communities in flood resilience planning and adaptation is essential. Locality capacity to complete resilience planning and implementation is typi-

cally minimal, so additional technical assistance and support by agency staff is needed.

Virginia must stay in RGGI in order to maintain funding for the Community Flood Preparedness Fund. But regardless of the future of RGGI in Virginia, localities will need additional consistent, long-term, and dedicated funding and financing strategies to meet the scale of the need. This should include appropriation of general funds as well as the utilization of additional federal funding streams. Additional transparency and oversight of adaptation resources guarantee that they are allocated equitably and in coordination with statewide flood resilience planning and natural resource priorities. Cross-agency collaboration is critical for flood planning success and requires clear leadership, including a Chief Resilience Officer and Special Assistant for Coastal Adaptation and Protection, as well as staff to advance this work.

Virginia is the first state to include sea level rise in its tidal wetlands permitting and the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act, but we could lose the majority of our tidal wetlands and coastal shoreline by mid-century without vigorous enforcement of these regulations. This necessitates more consistency across planning documents and program guidelines, as well as education by agency staff.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Direct DCR to apply fair treatment and meaningful involvement of low-income, rural, and tribal communities in flood-prone areas in program planning, funding mechanisms, and technical assistance, in coordination with DCR's existing and future outreach and engagement efforts related to the Coastal Resilience Master Plan and the statewide master planning process.

Maintain Virginia's participation in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative and that 45% of revenues generated from RGGI continue to be allocated to the CFPF.

Identify additional consistent, long-term, and dedicated funding – with transparent oversight of expenditures and cross-agency coordination – to address flood risk and advance flood resilience.

Increase staff capacity at multiple agencies (including at least 2 outreach and engagement staff at DCR, 2 Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act technical assistance staff at DEQ, and 1 Tidal Wetlands Act technical assistance staff at VMRC) to educate localities and relevant boards on changing regulations and provide direct technical assistance to local and regional governments for flood resilience planning and adaptation.

Incorporate climate change in long-term planning, such as comprehensive plans.