

# CLEANING UP POLLUTED STORMWATER RUNOFF

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Stormwater runoff from urban and suburban areas is the fastest growing source of pollution to our water and the main reason many of our urban streams are impaired. This growth is largely caused by the expansion of our built environment and impervious surfaces — parking lots, roofs, and roads — which carry more polluted runoff to our waterways. More intense rainfall events are in the forecast as a result of climate change, bringing more water and potentially costly flooding. Virginia's plan to clean up the Chesapeake Bay calls for strong investments in better stormwater control to protect clean water and frontline communities.

## CHALLENGE

Virginians rely on local creeks and rivers for healthy, vibrant communities and strong economies. Three-out-of-four Virginians depend upon healthy headwater streams for their drinking water.<sup>1</sup> Our Commonwealth is the largest seafood producer on the East Coast, with 50 commercially harvested species.<sup>2</sup> And our outdoor recreation industry is booming, providing over 100,000 direct jobs and \$4.4 billion in wages and salaries.<sup>3</sup>

Despite our reliance on healthy waterways, polluted runoff — the muddy stew of stormwater, dirt, bacteria, toxins, and plastic waste that runs off streets, parking lots, and other hard surfaces — continues to threaten our local creeks, streams, and rivers. It remains the fastest growing source of pollution to the Chesapeake Bay,<sup>4</sup> undermining Virginia's goal to restore local streams and the Bay by 2025.

Much of our urban and suburban infrastructure was built before we fully understood how stormwater degrades local streams. Now, many larger localities are required to reduce the nutrient and sediment pollution that they contribute to Virginia's waterways. Implementing programs to achieve these reductions — like projects to retrofit older infrastructure — can be expensive. But for years, low-income communities have been among the least likely to receive state funding to support this work. The state can and should encourage pollution reduction practices by providing strong, equitable funding support

and strengthening our existing stormwater regulations to account for heavier, more frequent rain events due to climate change. Cities and towns, churches and schools, homeowners and developers — everyone has a role to play in keeping nutrient and sediment pollution out of our stormwater.

## SOLUTION

### STORMWATER LOCAL ASSISTANCE FUND

To help with expensive stormwater projects, the Virginia General Assembly created the Stormwater Local Assistance Fund (SLAF), a state and local matching grant program to protect and improve the health of our waterways. This fund has recently been improved to provide additional attention to fiscally stressed communities and flood resilience. Over its lifespan, SLAF has authorized \$147 million in grants for 290 projects across Virginia, and demand for this program will continue to grow.<sup>5</sup> Based on the amount of pollution urban and suburban areas must remove to meet the Commonwealth's Bay Cleanup plan, the state needs to invest approximately \$80 million in SLAF annually. The General Assembly provided \$25 million in Fiscal Year 2023, with no funding allotted for Fiscal Year 2024. Strong, sustained funding is critical to ensure progress can be maintained.

### VIRGINIA CONSERVATION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Virginia Conservation Assistance Program (VCAP) is an urban cost-share program that provides financial incentives and technical and educational assistance to property owners installing eligible Best Management Practices (BMPs) in Virginia's participating Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs).

These practices such as rain gardens, conservation landscaping and living shorelines are installed where problems like erosion, poor drainage, or poor vegetation occur. Since the program began in 2012, Virginia's Soil and Water Conservation Districts and their partners have installed over 800 projects. Last year, the General Assembly included \$1 million to support VCAP projects across the state, but only allotted \$500,000 the year before. Consistent, stable funding is an important part of encouraging property owners to participate.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Allocate at least \$80 million each year for the Stormwater Local Assistance Fund to invest in pollution reduction projects and help localities meet their local water quality needs on time.

Maintain \$2 million per year for the Virginia Conservation Assistance Program to restore the creeks and streams our children play in; create habitat for birds, bees, and other pollinators; reduce localized flooding; and protect property values.

Promote resilient communities and smarter growth by strengthening Virginia's Erosion and Sediment Control Program and Stormwater Management Program to meet our Bay Cleanup goals and account for stronger, more frequent storm events.