

# INVESTING IN VIRGINIA'S HERITAGE & FUTURE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across Virginia's coast, piedmont, and mountains, we have a wealth of natural and cultural assets that are closely tied to the state's heritage and integral to its future. These assets are foundational to the state's economic, social, and environmental health. Taking care of these assets and making sure they are accessible to every Virginian requires state investment in conservation. Thanks to forethought from past administrations and legislatures, Virginia has strong programs and tools. These mechanisms simply need sufficient, consistent, and dedicated funding to ensure Virginia's future generations have the kind of Commonwealth we want to leave to them.

## CHALLENGE

Given the growing popularity of outdoor recreation and public interest in nature-based experiences, now is the time to expand conservation efforts. We can't wait until the challenges of population growth, development pressures, climate change, and historic inequities become overwhelming. Since 2000, more than 335,000 acres of Virginia farmland have been paved over or otherwise converted to non-agricultural uses (see PRESERVING FARMLAND THROUGH CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURE, page 35).<sup>1</sup> Without conservation we will lose the places that grow our food, ensure the quality of our drinking water supplies, preserve habitat for wildlife, sequester carbon, and provide healthy outdoor spaces for Virginia families. Across the demographic spectrum, Virginians have a conservation ethic. However, recent state budget spending on natural resources, state parks, and recreation is less than one percent; this ranks Virginia 4th to last nationally.<sup>2</sup> The need for additional funding is also called for throughout the Virginia Outdoors Plan 2018. The consequences of this lack of spending are real: lost opportunities to conserve more land and insufficient public access to lands that are already protected.

Virginia needs to fund existing and proven conservation mechanisms commensurate with demand and to match other sources of funding. Increasing state funding for conservation will leverage unprecedented federal dollars through the Great American Outdoors Act as well as strong private sector support for conservation. If state matching funds are not provided to unlock these federal dollars, Virginia could miss out.

Our conservation efforts must acknowledge historic and current disparities in terms of resources for some communities and treatment of segments of the population most notably native peoples and more broadly people of color. We need to expand conservation efforts in order to be able to begin to address injustices and inequalities past and present.

## 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 encour-

ages 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. Additionally, funding is needed for the new Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) Historic Preservation Fund to improve preservation of BIPOC historic and cultural resources.

These proven, effective and progressive 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 of 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 Outdoors Foundation's Get Outdoors program, which is much more accessible for small rural and urban localities and nonprofit organizations than Virginia's other grant programs.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

No changes should be made to the Land Preservation Tax Credit (LPTC), a proven and effective land conservation tool.

Support Virginia conservation agencies: additional staff at the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, Department of Conservation and Recreation, Department of Forestry, and Department of Wildlife Resources to keep up with land conservation opportunities with willing sellers. Provide adequate and timely support from the Office of the Attorney General and Department of General Services.

Adequately support real estate staff at each of these agencies.

Virginia's Land Conservation Grant Programs:

- \$20 million per year for the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation
- \$5 million per year for the Virginia Farmland Preservation Fund
- \$5 million per year for the Virginia Battlefield Preservation Fund
- \$5 million per year for the new Virginia BIPOC Historic Preservation Fund

\$20 million per year to extend Virginia Outdoors Foundation's Get Outdoors program (GO) throughout the Commonwealth.