

# INVESTING IN WASTEWATER INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 facilities and to remaining combined sewer overflow (CSO) systems. The Virginia General Assembly needs to support these programs to continue protecting water quality and public health.

## CHALLENGE

We are now seeing the beginnings of a remarkable, though still fragile, recovery of our local streams, rivers, and Chesapeake Bay — increased water clarity and quality, and thousands of acres of thriving aquatic grasses. These signs of success are strongly attributable to the hard work of wastewater agencies and the localities they serve, but also the Commonwealth's long-term financial commitment to the program, reflected in sustained funding for matching grants to upgrade nutrient pollution reduction capabilities.

In the last decade and a half, many of Virginia's wastewater treatment plants have adopted upgraded nutrient pollution removal technology to significantly reduce the pollution discharged to local rivers and the Bay. The work is not complete, however. Our watersheds have more people, fewer forests, and are facing climate change impacts. As a result, Virginia and regional partners will have to enhance efforts to meet the goal of a restored Bay, as called for in the Commonwealth's Phase III WIP.<sup>1</sup>

Virginia also has three cities with combined sewer systems that, when overloaded by stormwater, send untreated storm and wastewater directly into nearby rivers with concerning health implications.<sup>2</sup> Legislation passed in 2017 and 2020 put deadlines on the cities of Alexandria and Richmond to address untreated overflow events from

their combined sewer systems. But the scale of these infrastructure problems requires state help — particularly in Richmond, the seat of state government, where 23.2% of residents are below the poverty line<sup>3</sup> and already pay some of the highest wastewater rates in Virginia.

## 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 Phase III WIP. 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

Virginia should look to the estimated needs for wastewater and CSO upgrades when forming its FY2024 budget. Each year, DEQ conducts an annual needs assessment for the wastewater sector to project the amount of state funding needed to help localities meet their pollution reduction goals through infrastructure upgrades.<sup>6</sup> The results will be included in the annual Chesapeake Bay and Virginia Waters Clean-Up Plan, due winter 2022.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Richmond's most recent assessment estimates it will cost at least \$1.3 billion to complete remediation work on its combined sewer system.<sup>8</sup>

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Fully fund state grants for wastewater treatment upgrades to fulfill the requirements of the Enhanced Nutrient Reduction Certainty Program, as identified by the Needs Assessment, and cost-effectively reduce pollution to Virginia's waterways.

Maintain state funding to localities remediating aging CSO systems, once again making local rivers swimmable and fishable.