

# PROTECTING THE ALBEMARLE-PAMLICO WATERSHED

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virginia lies between the two largest estuaries in the United States: the Chesapeake Bay to the north and the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds to the south. We have an obligation to protect and restore both of these estuaries. With 25% of Virginia's land area draining to the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds and the increasing challenges to the health of this system, there is a critical need for baseline data that would ground effective planning in the Albemarle-Pamlico watershed. Effective planning will be aided by a mechanism for communication both among the cities and counties in Virginia that make up this watershed as well as good communication with our partners in North Carolina.

## CHALLENGE

The Virginia portion of the Albemarle-Pamlico watershed consists of three river basins and includes thirty-eight Virginia counties and cities. It covers roughly 10,500 square miles in the southern portion of our state, or 25% of the land area of Virginia. The area is rich in farmland and recreational opportunities as well as providing drinking water for approximately two million Virginians.

The watershed spans from the Atlantic Ocean well into the mountains past Roanoke, with habitats ranging from open estuary and coastal marsh to densely forested upland piedmont. Some of the plant and animal species here are not found anywhere else in Virginia and several are threatened or species of concern.

Increasingly, the health of this watershed and the rivers and estuaries that it supports is being threatened. The Albemarle-Pamlico faces increasing challenges from climate change and sea-level rise, increased precipitation and larger and longer-lasting storms,<sup>1</sup> storage of toxins and manure lagoons in flood plains, potential metals mining, increasing demands for groundwater from a shrinking aquifer, and need for improved farming practices.

## SOLUTION

On August 31, 2020, Virginia signed a Memorandum of Understanding<sup>2</sup> with North Carolina to work collaboratively on the management of the Albemarle-Pamlico watershed. To fulfill our obligations, Virginia needs to increase investment in the study and protection of this watershed to a degree that reflects its value to the Commonwealth.

Currently, there is a lack of baseline data on the Albemarle-Pamlico watershed areas of Virginia. We need better and more complete information in order to plan effectively for the future, including:

- Land-use and demographic data;
- Toxin and bio-waste storage information;
- Rainfall data and precipitation projections;
- Historic flooding data and rainfall and sea level rise predictions;
- Groundwater supply, usage, quality, and sustainability;
- Distribution and population data on key species of both flora and fauna, including endangered, threatened, and species of concern;
- Mapping that shows the location of conserved lands and riparian buffers;
- Threats to drinking water supplies;
- Assessment of the stormwater and wastewater needs by city and county; and
- Mapping and data of installed agricultural best management practices (BMP).

This information will become the basis for a much-needed strategic plan for Virginia's Albemarle-Pamlico watershed and our collaboration with North Carolina.

A significant part of Virginia lies in the Albemarle-Pamlico watershed, and we have a responsibility to restore and protect the natural resources as well as the quality of life of the residents in this watershed. We also have an obligation to work together with our partners in North Carolina to plan effectively for the future of this beautiful and bountiful estuary.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Cost-sharing funding for best management practices is needed in this part of the Commonwealth.

Fund a comprehensive Albemarle-Pamlico watershed study within the Department of Environmental Quality, to include at a minimum the items listed above.

Direct the appropriate agency to initiate a roundtable planning process with residents, community leaders, and the Nansemond tribe, for the Albemarle-Pamlico watershed in Virginia.

Back Bay Sunset, Virginia Beach

Photo by Lori A Cash