

SECURING LASTING FUNDING FOR LAND CONSERVATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virginian's identities and quality of life are rooted in our land. We take pride in our stunning and iconic landscapes: the rugged Appalachian Mountains, fertile Piedmont, tidal rivers flowing across the coastal plain to the Chesapeake Bay. Virginia's natural resources support local economies; form the foundation of our culture and diverse communities; and sustain the health of our people, our wildlife, and our water. But the demands facing Virginia's landscapes are growing and Virginia needs to increase the scale and speed of its conservation efforts to ensure these benefits for future generations. Establishing a dedicated funding source to supplement regular general fund dollars will equip Virginia to face these challenges directly.

CHALLENGE

Growing development pressures, accelerating impacts of climate change, and increasing usage of our public lands threaten to overwhelm Virginia's outdoors. Over the last few years, we have seen both the importance and desire of Virginians to get outdoors for recreation and mental health with state lands seeing record setting attendance numbers. State park attendance increased 15% from 2019 to 2020 and continued to increase from 2020 to 2021.¹ But the COVID pandemic also made obvious the inequities in access to the outdoors (see ENSURING CONSISTENT SUPPORT FOR PARKS & TRAILS, page 33) and the disproportionate health burdens carried by marginalized and underserved communities.

While Virginia's current approach to funding land conservation has had many great achievements, it is not enough to meet the growing needs of our outdoors. Indeed, Virginia funds natural resources at much lower rates than surrounding states. In FY 23 alone, Maryland has allocated over \$300 million for its Open Space Program.² That's more than double what Virginia has allocated for the Virginia Land Conservation Fund, the Farmland Preservation Fund, the Battlefield Preservation Fund, the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Preservation Fund, and funding for the State Trails Office combined over the next biennium. Even with record-setting revenue in the most recent budget, Virginia failed to fully fund its land conservation needs.

SOLUTION

If we are to meet the growing challenges facing the Commonwealth and address historic inequities, Virginia must establish a consistent, robust source of dedicated funding for conservation. By doing so, Virginia land conservation programs will have the support needed to achieve long-term, landscape-scale conservation, and ensure that federal funds are brought into the state.

A dedicated revenue stream can enhance our existing conservation programs and increase the scale and rapidity of projects to meet the growing demands placed on Virginia's environment. It will also allow for establishing new programs designed to specifically address conservation issues and marginalized communities that current programs are ill-equipped to address.

Increased funding through dedicated revenue will allow Virginia to fully capture available federal funding opportunities, such as the stateside Land and Water Conservation Fund,³ Forest Legacy Program,⁴ Agricultural Conservation Easement Program,⁵ and Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program,⁶ maximizing the outcomes Virginians receive for every dollar invested.

This dedicated funding must be used to supplement increased general fund appropriations for conservation initiatives. Overall funding must be increased to meet the Commonwealth's challenges.

States across the country have taken varied approaches to their dedicated funding mechanism. From dedicating a portion of marijuana sales tax revenue in Montana,⁷ dedicating a portion of existing sales tax revenue in Georgia,⁸ or sales tax on sporting goods in Texas,⁹ to real estate transfer fees in Maryland.¹⁰ The General Assembly is best equipped to find the mechanism or mechanisms best suited for Virginia and should consider all potential revenue sources.

A 2021 survey showed that nearly eight-in-ten Virginia voters support dedicating \$300 million per year to conservation programs - and these voters are represented statewide and across political party identities.¹¹

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Establish a source of dedicated funding that provides a minimum of \$300 million per year to natural resource conservation. Funding should be directed to supplement existing land conservation and trail programs, and to establish and fund new programs focused on addressing access to outdoor and green spaces among marginalized and underserved communities.