

WORKING WITH FARMERS TO PROTECT LOCAL WATERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Agriculture is Virginia's largest industry by many metrics. It also represents the largest source of nutrient and sediment pollution reaching Virginia's local streams, rivers, and the Chesapeake Bay.¹ Fortunately, addressing these pollution loads offers an opportunity to improve the Commonwealth's natural resources while also enhancing the positive economic impact of agriculture. The Virginia Agricultural Cost Share Program (VACS) funds the implementation of a wide suite of agricultural practices that reduce pollution while enhancing farm productivity. Virginia should follow through on its commitment to fully fund this impactful program.

CHALLENGE

The Chesapeake Bay Watershed Implementation Plan and the 2020 Virginia General Assembly (HB1422/SB704) set a distinct timeline for farmers to protect their streams and the Bay by installing voluntary conservation practices.² To meet our Bay goals by 2025, 75% of the remaining nitrogen pollution reductions must come from the agricultural sector.³ At our current pace, however, we will not have enough conservation practices installed on Virginia farmland on time. Without sufficient financial and technical support from a fully-funded VACS program to assist the agriculture sector in its critical role in reducing nutrient and sediment pollution to the Chesapeake Bay, the timeline will not be met and Virginia will be out of compliance with the Clean Water Act.

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation administers VACS through the Soil and Water Conservation Board and Virginia's 47 Soil and Water Conservation Districts. The Districts' experienced staff assists farmers and landowners to identify opportunities to improve local water quality and prevent pollution from reaching Virginia's waterways, provides technical assistance in implementing best management practices (BMPs), and helps to offset the cost of installing the practices.⁴ These BMPs include stream fencing and alternative water sources to keep livestock out of streams; nutrient management plans that help farmers decide when and how to apply fertilizers; riparian grass and forested buffers to filter nutrient and

sediment from runoff; conservation tillage and cover crops to keep soils on farms; and, many other practices essential to protecting Virginia's streams, lakes, rivers, and bays.

SOLUTION

Every other year, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation—working with farmers, the Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and other stakeholders—compiles an Agricultural Needs Assessment detailing how much investment is needed for agricultural BMPs. The most recent assessment shows that, in order to maximize benefits to local and downstream waterways and Virginia communities, VACS should be funded at no less than \$256 million over the biennium.⁵ For the first time, the General Assembly has fully-funded the VACS program in the state budget, a major achievement for Virginia. Strong, sustained funding at the level identified in the Agricultural Needs Assessment will facilitate a faster pace of progress, improve water quality, and invest in agricultural economies both in and beyond the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.

Investments in agricultural BMPs improve water quality, create local jobs, and deliver economic benefits for rural communities. Livestock exclusion from streams prevents calf losses and improves herd health.⁶ Increased efficiency of nutrient application reduces fertilizer loss while improving crop yield. Conservation tillage, cover crops, rotational grazing, and other practices further improve soil health and productivity.⁷

Reducing agricultural runoff will also improve the well-being of local communities that benefit from cleaner, healthier streams and rivers through safe drinking water, outdoor recreation, and enhanced tourism opportunities.

It is important that these investments in agricultural BMPs are equitably reaching historically underserved communities like farmers of color. As noted by the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board, the allocation of funding for the VACS program should address Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice concerns, and the state should follow through with this directive.⁸

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Maintain full funding (at least \$256 million) for the Virginia Agricultural Cost-Share Program (VACS), as estimated by the Agricultural Needs Assessment and accounting for impacts related to inflation.

Provide sufficient and stable funding for technical assistance by Soil and Water Conservation Districts to ensure adequate staff capacity and training.

Support additional financial incentives for long-term conservation practices like stream exclusion fencing and riparian buffers that are critical to meeting the requirements of the Watershed Implementation Plan and excluding livestock from all of the Commonwealth's perennial streams.