

ADVANCING EQUITABLE STATEWIDE FLOOD PLANNING

Morgan Butler // Southern Environmental Law Center // mbutler@selc.org

Jay Ford // Chesapeake Bay Foundation // jford@cbf.org

Emily Steinhilber // Environmental Defense Fund // esteinhilber@edf.org

Mary-Carson Stiff // Wetlands Watch // mc.stiff@wetlandswatch.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virginians are experiencing climate change firsthand, from rising seas along our coastlines, to flash floods in our mountains, and more powerful storms statewide. Although we have new programs to address increasing flood risk, work is siloed between agencies, the amount of reliable funding pales relative to the challenges we face, and not all programs adequately prioritize the economic and ecological benefits of nature-based solutions. Further, funding decisions need to be connected to ongoing planning efforts, and more public involvement and transparency can ensure limited dollars are spent responsibly. Finally, we must direct more resources to the most urgent threats — protecting under-resourced communities from flooding and reducing high-risk development in floodplains.

CHALLENGE

Flood resilience is a cross-sector issue impacting health and public safety as well as economic, cultural, social, and natural resources. Enhancing coordination across government will improve Virginia's ability to address the diverse needs of climate-impacted communities and leverage financial resources to build more resilient socio-ecological systems. This work requires long-term commitment from multiple agencies and stakeholders across Administrations.

Virginia's leaders have made progress in identifying flood risks and are beginning to address community needs through the Community Flood Preparedness Fund (CFPF).¹ Moving forward, effective planning and project implementation across agencies will require more funding and extensive capacity and coordination at both state and local levels; under-resourced, small, and rural communities that do not have the capacity to address flood risk on their own will need additional support.

For example, the CFPF, funded solely through Virginia's participation in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI),² distributed \$97.7 million statewide to 98 projects in 2021 and 2022. The program helps build local capacity, ensures at least 25% of distributed funding goes to under-resourced communities, and prioritizes nature-based projects. However, the most recent round of funding was heavily oversubscribed and with only one round of funding anticipated in late 2023, demand will be high, particularly for grants.

The Resilient Virginia Revolving Fund (RVRF), established in 2021, has \$25 million appropriated but lacks the CFPF's low-income set-aside and emphasis on nature-based solutions. Both funds need more consistent transparency, accountability, and oversight.

SOLUTION

An equitable and comprehensive approach to flood resilience is needed to protect Virginia's people, places, economy, and natural resources. State agencies must have clear direction to collaborate and adapt their programs and services to respond to climate change effectively. The continued prioritization and engagement of low-income, rural, and tribal communities is essential; DCR, DEQ,

VDEM, and VMRC should assist low-resource localities with technical assistance in grant writing, regulation implementation, and planning.

Virginia must demonstrate its commitment to resilience by appropriating general funds to the CFPF to begin meeting demand and have matching funds available for the generational federal funding opportunities the IJA and IRA will provide over the next several years. To ensure resources are used in alignment with the Commonwealth's Resilience Guiding Principles,³ DCR should establish a project prioritization process connected to the CFPF award scoring process.

In 2022, the Youngkin Administration made meaningful transparency commitments regarding CFPF and RVRF decision-making, including publishing all funding applications and scoring, soliciting public comment on guidance manuals, and establishing a public stakeholder panel to help evaluate applications. These commitments should be codified to ensure they are maintained across administrations.

Finally, we must ensure more funding from these programs is directed to the most significant needs — protecting under-resourced communities from flooding and reducing high-risk development in floodplains. To that end, the RVRF should incorporate the CFPF's required 25% set aside for under-resourced communities and include an explicit preference for projects that fund voluntary relocations of high-risk housing from floodplains, coupled with natural floodplain restoration.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

No less than \$200 million in general funds to the Community Flood Preparedness Fund (CFPF) without impacting other natural resources funding.

Authorize and empower a standalone Chief Resilience Officer and no less than six FTEs to facilitate interagency collaboration and leverage resources, and identify resilience coordinators within agencies.

Establish a project prioritization process connected to DCR's flood risk planning and available funding sources. DCR, DEQ, VDEM, and VMRC should assist low-resourced localities with technical assistance, grant writing, regulation implementation, and planning.

Establish CFPF and Resilient Virginia Revolving Fund (RVRF) transparency commitments.

Require 25% of RVRF funds go to under-resourced communities; prioritize projects that reduce high-risk development and restore natural floodplains.