

INVESTING IN CONSERVATION & OUTDOOR RECREATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Outdoor recreation connects people to the amazing landscapes and natural resources which make Virginia special. Investing in conservation and outdoor recreation is a priority but Virginia lacks a dedicated source of funding to support projects. Virginia should continue to prioritize conservation and outdoor recreation by commissioning a statewide study and workgroup to research dedicated funding mechanisms, so we can conserve land, protect water, and invest in public access infrastructure that makes outdoor recreation possible. Appointing a Director for the Office of Outdoor Recreation and conducting a study on the outdoor recreation economy will elevate outdoor recreation and associated benefits across the Commonwealth.

CHALLENGE

Virginia State Parks, Wildlife Management Areas, State Forests, Natural Area Preserves, statewide trail systems, and bodies of water are wonderful places for Virginians and visitors to connect to the outdoors. Outdoor recreation on public lands and waterways contributes to our high quality of life, employs 106,993 Virginians, and generates \$9.4 billion for our economy annually.¹ But for too many Virginians, public lands and waterways are inaccessible due to barriers including their distance from home and lack of inclusive facilities. Additionally, race and income play a role in determining the quality and size of parks and green spaces to which individuals have access in their communities. More affluent and predominantly White neighborhoods tend to have access to higher quality park systems with more acreage than those with larger low-income and Latino or Black populations.² Simply put, we need additional investment in conservation and outdoor recreation projects to ensure Virginians can access the outdoors and enjoy the benefits of outdoor recreation.

Existing conservation programs have been inconsistently funded and are not designed for all conservation needs. The lack of dedicated funding to support conservation and outdoor recreation projects is a significant shortcoming as Virginia ranks near the bottom compared to other states' spending on natural resources.³

SOLUTION

Virginia needs a dedicated source of funding for conservation and outdoor recreation projects to ensure residents and visitors, who bring dollars into our economy, can enjoy places that make our Commonwealth a special place to live and visit. Other states have adopted a variety of dedicated funding programs, the strongest of which were established through constitutional amendments or statutes. By establishing a stable, dedicated funding source for natural resources conservation and outdoor recreation, we can protect the land and water that make Virginia special and invest in public access infrastructure that facilitates outdoor recreation. Additionally, appointing

a Director for the Office of Outdoor Recreation and studying the economic impact of outdoor recreation will expand the benefits of outdoor recreation and quantify them.

Furthermore, let's ensure resources are available to fund local parks, green spaces, and public access infrastructure projects by fully funding the Virginia Land Conservation Fund (VLCF). Doing so will increase funding available for community park and green space projects by including the Virginia Outdoors Foundation's Preservation Trust Fund and Get Outdoors grant programs. See additional policy paper recommendations to fund these programs in INVESTING IN VIRGINIA'S HERITAGE & FUTURE (pg 33), PROTECTING HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCES (pg 37), STRENGTHENING PARK FUNDING (pg 43), and ENSURING CONSISTENT SUPPORT FOR TRAILS (pg 83).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Commission a statewide study and interagency workgroup to research dedicated funding mechanisms for natural resources and develop innovative funding strategies that meet the unique needs and challenges of the state. The workgroup would be supported by the Secretariat of Natural and Historic Resources.

Appoint a Director for the Office of Outdoor Recreation within the Secretariat of Natural and Historic Resources to coordinate across outdoor recreation programs in state agencies and partnerships to expand the benefits of outdoor recreation and enhance state competitiveness.

\$500,000 to be administered by the Virginia Tourism Corporation and Secretariat of Commerce and Trade to develop a scope of work and plan to study the economic impact and financial outcomes for outdoor recreation and related tourism as recommended by the current Virginia Outdoors Plan.⁴