

# PREVENTING POLLUTED STORMWATER RUNOFF

Blair Blanchette // Va Association of Soil & Water Conservation Districts // [blair.blanchette@vaswcd.org](mailto:blair.blanchette@vaswcd.org)

Adam Gold // Environmental Defense Fund // [agold@edf.org](mailto:agold@edf.org)

Brent Hunsinger // Friends of the Rappahannock // [brent.hunsinger@riverfriends.org](mailto:brent.hunsinger@riverfriends.org)

Joe Wood // Chesapeake Bay Foundation // [jwood@cbf.org](mailto:jwood@cbf.org)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Stormwater runoff is the fastest-growing source of pollution to our water and the main reason many of our urban streams are impaired. Significant development pressures result in the expansion of impervious surfaces – parking lots, roofs, and roads – in suburban and urban areas (including huge distribution and data centers). More intense rainfall events are in the forecast as a result of climate change, bringing more water and potentially costly flooding into homes and businesses. Virginia's plan to clean up the Chesapeake Bay calls for strong investments in better stormwater control to protect clean water and frontline communities.

## CHALLENGE

Virginians rely on local creeks and rivers for healthy, vibrant communities and strong economies. Three out of four Virginians depend upon healthy headwater streams for their drinking water.<sup>1</sup> Our Commonwealth is the largest seafood producer on the East Coast, with 50 commercially harvested species.<sup>2</sup> Our outdoor recreation industry is booming, providing over 100,000 direct jobs and \$4.4 billion in wages and salaries.<sup>3</sup>

Despite our reliance on healthy waterways, polluted runoff — the muddy stew of stormwater, dirt, bacteria, toxins, and plastic waste that runs off lawns, streets, parking lots, and other hard surfaces — continues to threaten our local creeks, streams, and rivers. It remains the fastest growing source of pollution to the Chesapeake Bay, undermining Virginia's goal to restore local streams and the Bay by 2025. Much of our urban and suburban infrastructure was built before we fully understood how stormwater degrades local streams. Now, many larger localities are required to reduce the nutrient and sediment pollution that they contribute to Virginia's waterways. Implementing programs to achieve these reductions — like projects to retrofit older infrastructure — can be expensive and often require access to private property. For years, low-income communities have been among the least likely to receive state funding to support this work. The state can and should encourage pollution reduction practices by providing both strong, equitable funding support and legislative support to ensure all homeowners can install best management practices, as well as strengthening our existing stormwater regulations to account for heavier, more frequent rain events due to climate change. Cities and towns, churches and schools, homeowners, and developers — everyone has a role to play in keeping nutrient and sediment pollution out of our stormwater.

## SOLUTION

### STORMWATER LOCAL ASSISTANCE FUND

The Stormwater Local Assistance Fund (SLAF) is a state and local matching grant program that protects and improves the health of our waterways by funding locality stormwater projects.<sup>4</sup> This fund has recently been amended to provide additional attention to fiscally

stressed communities and flood resilience. Over its lifespan, SLAF has authorized \$178 million in grants for 331 projects across Virginia, and demand for this program will continue to grow.<sup>5</sup> Based on the reduction in stormwater-caused pollution that Virginia must make to achieve the Commonwealth's Bay Cleanup Plan, and the cost to date of cleaning up pollution from this source, the state needs to invest approximately \$80 million in SLAF annually. The General Assembly provided \$25 million in Fiscal Year 2023, with no funding allotted for Fiscal Year 2024. Strong, sustained funding and updated guidelines are critical to ensure progress can be maintained and the program is utilized.

## VIRGINIA CONSERVATION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Virginia Conservation Assistance Program (VCAP) is an urban cost-share program facilitated by Virginia's participating Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). VCAP provides financial incentives and technical and educational assistance to commercial and residential property owners installing eligible Best Management Practices (BMPs) where problems like erosion, poor drainage, or poor vegetation occur. These practices such as rain gardens, conservation landscaping, and more complex engineered solutions such as vegetated conveyance systems are installed. To date, over 900 projects have been completed with \$6.2 million obligated in cost-share to property owners in Virginia. This program provides an ideal way for Virginians to make a difference in their communities and is utilized most when consistently funded. Furthermore, legislative support would also help ensure residents of Virginia's 8,810 community associations<sup>6</sup> can leverage this program without being prohibited from installing conservation landscaping via their covenants.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

\$80 million each year for the Stormwater Local Assistance Fund to invest in pollution reduction projects and help localities meet their local water quality needs on time.

\$4 million each year for the Virginia Conservation Assistance Program to address stormwater runoff from existing impervious surfaces, create wildlife habitat, promote flood resilience, and protect property values and economic opportunity.

Ensure that homeowners living in community associations have the option to install conservation landscaping to help address runoff on private property.