

LAND CONSERVATION BENEFITING ALL VIRGINIANS

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WHY IT MATTERS

From the forested ridges of the Appalachians and vast fertile valleys to the shores of the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean, the lands and waters of Virginia play a vital role in the state's environmental, economic, and social health. However, these important resources are at risk of being lost.

In Virginia, 26,000 acres of forestland¹ are lost each year and farmland¹ is disappearing at a rate of over 99,000 acres annually.² Many significant national historic and cultural sites remain unprotected, threatening the loss of important pieces of our shared history. Almost 900 plant and animal species are declining due to habitat loss, threats from invasive species, (see page 69) new diseases, and climate change.³

Virginia's lands and waters provide the basis for agriculture, forestry, outdoor recreation, and tourism – key economic sectors in the state, especially in rural communities. For every public \$1 invested in land conservation, \$4 in natural goods and services is returned to the Commonwealth.⁴ Every job in agriculture and forestry supports 1.7 jobs elsewhere in Virginia's economy.⁴ In 2021, 102 million visitors spent \$25.2B across Virginia's economy and tourism-supported jobs accounted for 5.2% of all jobs in the state.⁵

At least 70% of Virginians support public spending to prevent the loss of natural areas and open spaces, yet Virginia lacks a dedicated source of funding to support Virginia's outdoor spaces.⁴ The result is that underfunded and inconsistently funded programs are not able to keep up with the demand for trails, parks, public lands, and the staff and infrastructure needed so that people can use them.⁴

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

More than 80% of land in Virginia is privately owned. Tools and funding are needed for landowners to conserve their land. Fortunately, the Commonwealth has effective land conservation programs already in place. These programs rely on robust and consistent funding to meet the growing demands of our time.

LAND PRESERVATION TAX CREDIT (LPTC)

Virginia's LPTC is one of the most successful and progressive private land conservation programs in the country. It encourages voluntary land conservation by providing tax credits equal to 40% of the value of donated land or conservation easements.

VIRGINIA LAND CONSERVATION FOUNDATION (VLCF)

VLCF provides state matching grants on a competitive basis for the protection of open spaces and parks, natural areas, historic areas, and farmland and forest

preservation.

VIRGINIA FARMLAND AND FOREST LAND PRESERVATION FUND

The Farmland and Forest Preservation Fund was created in 2024 as part of establishing the Office of Working Lands Preservation after the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) Office of Farmland Preservation was transferred to the Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF). This move creates a new and potent opportunity and a more holistic approach to accelerating the pace of working lands by providing matching funds to leverage significant local, federal, and private funding sources to protect the state's best farm and forest land.

VIRGINIA BATTLEFIELD PRESERVATION FUND

The Virginia Battlefield Preservation Fund provides matching funds to leverage significant local, federal, and private funding sources to preserve historically significant places.

BLACK, INDIGENOUS, AND PEOPLE OF COLOR (BIPOC) FUND

The Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) Historic Preservation Fund was established in 2022, creating a grant program to acquire, protect, and rehabilitate historic and archaeological sites of significance to support Virginia's historically underserved and underrepresented communities.

VIRGINIA OUTDOORS FOUNDATION'S GET OUTDOORS PROGRAM

This existing program, which funds small park and trail projects, is much more accessible for small rural and urban localities and nonprofit organizations than Virginia's other grant programs. Many historically underserved community organizations have received funding from this program.

OPPORTUNITIES

Robust, consistent state investments in existing conservation mechanisms are needed to address growing threats on a meaningful scale. The majority of residents support increased investments in conservation. Virginia has developed individual programs over the years that are proven to meet different conservation needs and now is the time to consider how best to fund them as a whole at sustainable levels as outlined below.

\$90M per year to the Land Preservation Tax Credit. The entire 2% of the Transfer Fee should go to managing the LPTC and stewardship of protected land, no amount should be diverted to the General Fund.

- \$30M per year for the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation

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- \$5M per year for the Virginia Farmland and Forest Preservation Fund
- \$5M per year for the Virginia Battlefield Preservation Fund
- \$5M per year for the Virginia BIPOC Historic Preservation Fund
- \$5M per year to extend Virginia Outdoors Foundation's Get Outdoors (GO) program throughout the Commonwealth.
- Enact Virginia's Great Outdoors Act, which would provide dedicated funding to provide reliable and consistent support for the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation and Virginia's other existing conservation programs.
- Support additional staff at state agencies: VOF, DCR, DOF, and DWR. Bolster professional resources available from the Office of the Attorney General and Department of General Services to ensure the effectiveness of conservation agencies.

A permanent, dedicated source of revenue that serves the wide array of conservation needs and opportunities, from pocket parks to productive farmland would augment these essential programs. Programs that support urban conservation and underserved communities with a sustained source of reliable funds would also allow localities to better plan their outdoor recreation infrastructure investments with certainty that their needs will be met.

ENDNOTES

1. "Forestland Loss - Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District," Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District, (February 19, 2015). <https://www.culpeperswcd.org/natural-resource-issues/forestland-loss>.
2. National Agricultural Statistics Service, *Census of Agriculture*, (2024) <https://www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus/>.
3. "Virginia's Wildlife Action Plan," Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, (June 24, 2024), <https://dwr.virginia.gov/blog/virginias-wildlife-action-plan>.
4. "Our Virginia Outdoors," Our Virginia Outdoors, (June 24, 2024), <https://ourvirginiaoutdoors.com>.
5. "ECONOMIC IMPACT of VISITORS in VIRGINIA 2021," (2022), <https://www.vatc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2021-Economic-Impact-of-Visitors-in-Virginia.pdf>.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

In Virginia, 26,000 acres of forestland are lost each year and farmland is disappearing at a rate of over 99,000 acres annually.

The Commonwealth has proven land conservation programs in place that rely on robust and consistent funding from the Commonwealth

Dedicated, full funding would augment these programs to effectively address the increasing loss of working lands, achieve conservation goals, and make public lands accessible to all Virginians.