

SUPPORTING AGRICULTURE FOR CLEAN WATER

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WHY IT MATTERS

Agriculture is Virginia's largest industry with 7.7 million acres producing about 8.7% of the state's economic output.¹ Virginia farms produce food and fiber, maintain open space, mitigate floods, create jobs, unite communities, and sustain wildlife. They also provide the greatest opportunity to reduce nutrient and sediment pollution reaching Virginia's local streams, rivers, and the Chesapeake Bay.²

Fortunately, it is possible to address pollution loads and protect the Commonwealth's natural resources while also enhancing the positive economic and societal impacts of agriculture. By improving animal and soil health and aiding in efficient nutrient management, agricultural best management practices improve water quality and also help increase farm profitability.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) administers the state-funded Virginia Agricultural Cost Share (VACS) Program through 47 Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). The Districts' experienced staff assist farmers and landowners to improve local water quality by providing technical assistance in implementing best management practices (BMPs), and helping to offset the cost of the BMPs. These farm practices include stream fencing and alternative water sources to keep livestock out of streams; nutrient management plans that help farmers efficiently apply fertilizers; riparian grass and forested buffers to filter nutrients and sediment from runoff; conservation tillage and cover crops to conserve productive soils; and many other practices that protect Virginia's streams, lakes, rivers, and bays, improve productive agricultural soils, and benefit farm businesses.

The 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP) called on states to have practices in place by 2025 to reduce sediment and nutrient pollution to the Bay from their rivers and streams. The most recent data show that Virginia will fall far short of that goal, with 90% of the remaining pollution reductions needed to meet the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) expected to come from the agricultural sector. Virginia started meeting the VACS program needs assessment in 2022. For most of the program's history, it has not had the resources required to assist all farmers to achieve the target pollution reductions. A fully-funded Agricultural BMP program is essential to provide the financial and technical support required for the agricultural sector to adequately reduce nutrient and sediment pollution to local waters and the Chesapeake Bay. Although our current pace of implementation will not achieve our goals by the 2025 Bay restoration deadline, there has been notable progress in recent years thanks to historic funding levels. This is no time to slow our efforts. To comply with the Clean Water Act, Virginia must continue to provide farmers the funding and support for best management practices (BMPs) on their farms.

OPPORTUNITIES

Fully funding the VACS program in the state budget is a major achievement for Virginia. Strong, sustained funding

at the level identified in the Agricultural Needs Assessment will facilitate water quality improvements at a faster pace of progress.

The 2024-2025 state budget also included \$20M in the first year for the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to reduce nonpoint source pollution, like that from agricultural fields, through a pay-for-outcomes program. To ensure this program complements rather than competes with the VACS program and other grantmaking and federal programs that assist farmers, this program will require sufficient agency capacity to administer the program, verify the outcomes, and ensure that the program provides opportunities to farmers who have not been able to access existing cost-share programs.

A 2023 report that evaluated the Chesapeake Bay cleanup progress³ includes additional suggestions to accelerate the restoration of the watershed, including:

- Refocus conservation efforts on shallow water habitats to make a more immediate impact for the wildlife and people of the Commonwealth. Installing BMPs like vegetated buffers, living shorelines (page 27), excluding livestock from streams, and creating year-round vegetative cover on farms will reduce nonpoint source pollution, sequester carbon, mitigate flooding, and create corridors for landscape-level conservation.
- Prioritize hotspots to achieve more effective reductions in pollution to local waterways. Combining monitoring and modeling data to identify areas where there is a nutrient imbalance will allow more strategic placement of BMPs to reduce pollution. Funding for BMPs and technical assistance should also be targeted to these locations.

The state should also identify and embrace opportunities to partner with federal and nonprofit programs to take advantage of unprecedented funding for agricultural producers and allow for innovation that accelerates the adoption of BMPs and/or accelerates pollution reductions.

In addition, a dedicated, well-funded Riparian Forested Buffer program initiative would provide consistent and long-term funding for this critical BMP.

These investments in agricultural BMPs must be equitably reaching historically under-resourced communities like farmers of color and beginning farmers. 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.⁴

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TOP TAKEAWAYS

Maintaining full funding for the Virginia Agricultural Cost Share (VACS) program and focusing on long-term conservation practices will reduce pollution loads while also enhancing the positive economic and societal impacts of agriculture.

The Virginia DCR and the SWCDs require staff capacity and training to provide the necessary technical assistance to successfully implement the fully-funded VACS program.

The DEQ's new pay-for-performance program will be an opportunity to improve water quality which requires adequate staffing and funding to be successful.

Shenandoah Valley Farm - Page County

Photo by Lori A Cash



ENDNOTES

1. "Economic Impacts of Agriculture and Forest Industries in Virginia," *Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service* (2022).
2. Chesapeake Assessment and Scenario Tool (CAST) Version 2019. Chesapeake Bay Program Office, accessed June, 2024.
3. "Achieving water quality goals in the Chesapeake Bay: A comprehensive evaluation of system response" Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC). (K. Stephenson & D. Wardrop, Eds. 2023).
4. "Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board Electronic Meeting Minutes," *Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation* (May 20, 2021): 10-11, <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/document/SWCB-May-20-2021-DRAFT-minutes.pdf>.