

# SUPPORTING AGRICULTURE FOR A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

Matt Kowalski // Chesapeake Bay Foundation // mkowalski@cbf.org

Kevin Tate // Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley // ktate@shenandoahalliance.org

Kendall Tyree // VA Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts // kendall.tyree@vaswcd.org

## WHY IT MATTERS

Agriculture is Virginia's largest industry with over 7 million acres producing about 8.7% of the state's economic output.<sup>1</sup> Virginia farms produce food and fiber, maintain open space, help mitigate floods, create jobs, unite communities, and support wildlife. They also provide the state's greatest opportunity to sequester carbon and to reduce nutrient and sediment pollution reaching Virginia's local streams, rivers, and the Chesapeake Bay.<sup>2</sup> Farms have the potential to be the solution to many of our most pressing environmental problems.

Fortunately, it is possible to address pollution and protect the Commonwealth's natural resources while also enhancing the positive economic and societal impacts of agriculture. Agricultural best management practices (BMPs) improve water quality and watershed function, increase soil carbon, and help increase farm profitability by improving animal, soil, crop, and forest health and aiding in efficient nutrient management on farms.

## CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Typical farm BMPs include fencing livestock out of streams and providing alternative water systems, nutrient management plans that help farmers efficiently apply fertilizers, grass and forested buffers along streams to filter nutrients and sediment from runoff, and conservation tillage and cover crops that conserve productive soils and keep nutrients in place. These and other practices protect Virginia's streams, lakes, rivers, and bays, build productive agricultural soils, and ultimately benefit farm businesses, though they can be cost-prohibitive to adopt in the short term. State cost-share and federal incentive programs have long been used to help farmers adopt BMPs.

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), while the Department of Agriculture administers Federal programs through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The District's trained staff provide technical assistance to farmers and landowners to plan and implement BMPs, and the VACS program helps offset the cost of the BMPs. VACS helps farmers adopt and implement changes to farm management that also result in improved water quality and more productive soils. NRCS programs have historically been used in conjunction with VACS to support conservation on farms.

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. The most recent data show that Virginia will fall far short of that goal, with over 95% of the remaining pollution reductions expected to come from the agricultural sector.<sup>2</sup> For most of VACS's history, it has not had the resources required to assist all farmers in achieving pollution reductions. 2022 was the first year that Virginia funded VACS sufficiently to meet the state's annual WIP goals. A fully-funded Agricultural BMP program is essential to provide the financial and technical support for the agricultural sector to reduce nutrient and sediment pollution to local waters and the Chesapeake Bay. Indeed, since receiving full funding from 2022-2024, there has been notable progress in modeled pollution reductions from the Agricultural sector. At a time when NRCS has lost nearly a quarter of its Virginia employees,<sup>3</sup> and federal programs are seeing budget cuts, it is more critical than ever that Virginia provides robust and consistent funding for the VACS program and SWCDs; adequate funding can ensure that Virginia complies with the Clean Water Act and helps create healthy and resilient farms.

## OPPORTUNITIES

Fully funding the VACS program in the state budget has been a major achievement for Virginia. Continued funding at the level identified in the Agricultural Needs Assessment will accelerate water quality and environmental improvements for the entire Commonwealth. The State should embrace the chance to ensure support for farmers at a time when Federal support for similar programs is in question. Environmental improvements could be further advanced if Virginia conducts an analysis of the VACS program that identifies ways to make VACS more efficient and effective at improving water quality and increasing farmer participation. Some ideas to consider include:

- Prioritize hot-spots to achieve more effective reductions in pollution to local waterways. Combining local monitoring and modeling data to identify areas where there is a nutrient imbalance will allow more strategic placement of BMPs to reduce pollution.<sup>4</sup> Funding for BMPs and technical assistance should also be targeted to these locations.
- Focus on ways to accelerate the implementation of practices that have fallen well short of WIP goals. For example, a dedicated, sufficiently funded Riparian Forested Buffer program initiative would provide consistent and long-term support for this critical BMP.

# SUPPORTING AGRICULTURE FOR A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

Matt Kowalski // Chesapeake Bay Foundation // mkowalski@cbf.org

Kevin Tate// Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley // ktate@shenandoahalliance.org

Kendall Tyree // VA Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts // kendall.tyree@vaswcd.org

- Recognize that building healthy soils is an important component of water quality improvements. Prioritize the implementation of soil health BMPs on upland farms, especially in regions of the Commonwealth with high connectivity between surface and groundwater.

## TOP TAKEAWAYS

With reduced support for federal programs and staff, maintaining full funding for the Virginia Agricultural Cost-Share program (based on the annual needs assessment) and focusing on long-term conservation practices will reduce pollution loads while also enhancing the positive economic, environmental, and societal impacts of agriculture.

For a fully-funded VACS program to be successful, Virginia will need additional funding for staff and training at DCR and the SWCDs.

Strategic placement of BMPs and other ways to maximize the efficiency of the VACS program can significantly accelerate the reduction of pollution to achieve the clean water goals of the Commonwealth.

## ENDNOTES

1. Rephann, T. J. (2022). *The economic impact of the agriculture and forest industries in Virginia*. University of Virginia, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service. <https://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/pdf/weldoncooper.pdf>
2. *Chesapeake assessment and scenario tool (CAST) version 2023, Phase 6-7.14.0*. (2025). Chesapeake Bay Program. <https://cast.chesapeakebay.net/>
3. Paullin, C. (2025). *USDA staffing and funding cuts would threaten Virginia's ability to reach Chesapeake Bay cleanup goals*. Inside Climate News. <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/14052025/usda-cuts-threaten-virginia-chesapeake-bay-cleanup-goals/>
4. Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC). (2023). *Achieving water quality goals in the Chesapeake Bay: A comprehensive evaluation of system response*. Chesapeake Bay Program. <https://www.chesapeake.org/stac/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CESR-Final-update.pdf>