WETLANDS RESOURCE RESILIENCE ACTION

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WHY IT MATTERS

Virginia's coastal wetlands are among the most critical natural resources in the Commonwealth for habitat and community safety.[1] But these ecosystems are increasingly threatened by accelerating development, rising sea levels, and climate change. According to the Coastal Resilience Master Plan (CRMP) Part I, released in 2021, up to 89% of Virginia's existing tidal wetlands could be permanently inundated by 2080 if no action is taken.[2] This loss would have profound environmental, economic, and public safety implications.

Wetlands act as natural buffers, absorbing storm surges and stabilizing shorelines from coastal erosion. Their ability to sequester carbon and filter pollutants makes them indispensable for climate mitigation and water quality protection–two statewide priorities under the Chesapeake Bay Program and Virginia's Coastal Zone Management Program. Without active intervention, their degradation will increase exposure for coastal communities, especially those with fewer resources to adapt to rising sea levels and increased flood risk.

Protecting and restoring the health of existing wetlands, along with conserving adjacent lands where wetlands can migrate as sea levels rise, are key strategies for building natural resource resilience. These efforts must be supported by proactive land use planning and targeted conservation funding. By investing in nature-based solutions, Virginia can safeguard biodiversity, strengthen shoreline stabilization, and protect the health and well-being of its residents. This is not only an environmental imperative but a matter of long-term community resilience.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Despite having a policy of "no net loss" for wetlands, the reality is that Virginia has seen significant reductions in tidal and non-tidal wetland acreage. Virginia is now taking meaningful, coordinated steps to strengthen wetlands policy and turn this downtrend around. Creating the Wetlands Policy Task Force (the Task Force) and Technical Wetlands Work Group (the Work Group) marks the first time the Commonwealth has formally focused on implementing a cohesive wetlands strategy. These efforts represent a shift from planning to action, informed in part by the Virginia Wetland Program Plan,[3] which has helped shape our understanding of statewide challenges and offered early direction for solutions. Together, the Task Force and Work Group aim to evaluate and improve how Virginia protects, restores, and manages both tidal and non-tidal wetlands, just as federal protections are being scaled back. With the EPA planning to limit jurisdictional permit reviews in line with the Sackett v. EPA Supreme Court decision,[4] state leadership has never been more critical.

While recent actions to accelerate planning are only half the equation, the next urgent step is to ensure that these convened bodies act and specifically answer the question: how will Virginia guide wetland migration and secure space for these essential ecosystems to adapt and persist? As sea level rise accelerates and regulatory gaps widen, the Commonwealth must act swiftly to ensure its wetlands persist into the future.

OPPORTUNITIES

With the Task Force and Work Group now in place, Virginia is finally in a position to shift from planning to action on long-overdue wetland priorities. One of the most pressing needs is a cross-agency framework that aligns the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC), Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), and local wetlands boards so that wetlands, Chesapeake Bay resource protection areas, and living shoreline standards are applied consistently across the Commonwealth.

Just as important is ensuring reliable, long-term support for essential decision-making tools like DEQ's Wetland Condition Assessment Tool (WetCAT) and Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS)'s Tidal Marsh Inventory. Progress on Chesapeake Bay cleanup goals also depends on building out a clear, integrated database that tracks wetland gains, losses, and unpermitted impacts, so that agencies and stakeholders alike have a shared, transparent view of where things stand. Without sustained funding, we risk falling behind on the science that guides everything from permitting to restoration.

And if we're serious about our wetlands keeping pace with sea level rise, Virginia needs to create a permitting path for thin-layer placement of dredged sediments to help wetlands persist in place and explore financial incentives to encourage the conservation of wetlands migration zones. Currently, there is resistance to using dredged sediment to raise sinking marshes, even though it's a recognized tool in other coastal states for maintaining critical habitat and the persistence of tidal wetlands. Additionally, we lack adequate financial incentives to encourage property owners to protect land where wetlands will migrate under sea level rise conditions. These are only two examples of the types of strategies the two wetlands workgroups will need to explore and offer tangible pathways to implementation. In order to make

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today's momentum count, we should remove these barriers and provide Virginia's wetlands the space, resources, and flexibility needed to survive what is to come.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Up to 89% of Virginia's existing tidal wetlands could be lost to permanent inundation by 2080 without intervention to help wetlands migrate landward and persist in place, magnifying flood and water-quality risks.

The Wetlands Policy Task Force and Technical Work Group put Virginia on par with other states, but rapid action is needed to translate plans into implementable strategies.

Stable funding for decision tools, integrated shoreline guidance, financial incentives, and a comprehensive gains-and-losses database are state-level levers that can turn today's planning into durable action for wetland resilience.

ENDNOTES

1. *Wetlands infographics*. (n.d.) Virginia Institute of Marine Science. https://www.vims.edu/_infographics/wetlands
2. *Virginia Coastal Resilience Master Plan*. (2021). Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/crmp/document/virginiacoastalresiliencemasterplan.pdf
3. *Virginia Watershed Protection Plan*. (2022, August). U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2022-08/VA%20WPP%202020-2025%20amended%204_29.pdf
4. *Sackett v. Environmental Protection Agency*, 598 U.S. 651 (2023). https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/21-454_4g15.pdf