

SETTING A STRONG CONSERVATION GOAL

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WHY IT MATTERS

Land and water resources support the ecosystems and quality of life on which all Virginians depend. They are utterly necessary to three of our largest industries: agriculture, tourism, and forestry. We should ensure that we conserve land for its economic value, beauty, cultural importance, recreational access, and environmental integrity. If Virginia sets a strong goal for how much land to conserve in the coming years, we can meet the needs of these industries and keep the Commonwealth's green infrastructure strong.

At present, about 4.3 million acres—or 17%—of Virginia's land area is conserved.¹ This includes everything from national forest land to neighborhood parks to farms in **conservation easements**. But we continue to see forests felled for large-scale development, data centers impact our watersheds, and parks become overcrowded. More rapid land conservation is needed to strike a better balance. By setting a clear and ambitious goal, Virginia can attract funding and energy to the critical conservation needs that we face.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Article XI of Virginia's Constitution makes it state policy to protect land and other natural resources, and occasionally, governors have set goals to conserve a certain number of acres or sites during their terms. Virginia has agreed to a set of **land conservation** goals by signing onto the **Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement**. As a signatory, we have promised to help protect an additional 2 million acres of the Bay watershed by 2040.² But this goal leaves two significant gaps: it doesn't offer anything to the 38 Virginia counties and cities that lie entirely outside the Bay watershed³ and previous phases of the Bay Agreement have a history of falling short.⁴

Other states have chosen various land conservation targets. North Carolina set a goal of conserving 1 million acres of natural lands by 2040 and Maryland set (and achieved) a goal to conserve 30% by 2030.^{5,6}

Virginia's policies and funding streams support voluntary land conservation, including grant and incentive programs detailed elsewhere in Our Common Agenda. However, applications for grants routinely exceed available funding appropriated by the General Assembly. Applicants often face long waits to work with minimally-staffed state agencies and private, non-profit **land trusts**.

We have a wealth of data to identify places with essential resources – such as prime agricultural soils, resilient plant and animal communities, intact forests, unique species, and places that tell the story of Vir-

ginia. We know which of these places are unprotected, too. We also have data on gaps in recreational access, such as too few boat ramps or overly long drives to reach outdoor resources. **ConserveVirginia**, the state's assessment tool, identifies more than 7 million acres of “top priority conservation opportunities” in the Commonwealth.⁷

Land conservation is not just a rural matter: Virginia's urban areas have a strong history of setting aside land. As the price of real estate skyrockets, though, it becomes difficult to set aside more land for parks or flood protection. The Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement sets a goal of conserving 10% of the land in urban areas, but only 2 Census Urban Areas in Virginia have reached this threshold, and 8 have no conserved land reported at all.⁸

OPPORTUNITIES

Given the right incentives, Virginia can make great strides in land conservation. Previous governors have set goals to conserve certain numbers of acres or sites, and these proved to be achievable: For a few years in the late 2000s, the state and its nonprofit land trust partners conserved about 100,000 acres per year, using a combination of priority-setting and funding incentives. We could make equally impressive achievements today, with the right commitment to action.

Virginia deserves a land conservation goal of its own. A bold vision for the entire state will go beyond the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement to meet community needs and support our largest industries that require affordable access to land. The goal should balance urban demands for nearby nature with rural needs where land is plentiful, providing outdoor access and representation for all Virginians. The goal should be rooted in proven accomplishments and identified resources.

This commitment to action should call for protection of Virginia's land at an increased pace, rising from 70,000 to 100,000 acres of land every year. This rate would allow us to meet identified needs across the Commonwealth, achieve Virginia's commitments to the Chesapeake Bay, and build sustainably on the pace of recent years. This goal should include a scalable target for urban areas that encourages achievement but allows for variation across localities. When milestones of 20% of the state (in about 2033) and the Bay Agreement's 2040 target have been achieved, new goals can be evaluated. Defining and committing to this pace will allow Virginia to take deliberate action to achieve it.

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A clear and ambitious land conservation goal can provide a much-needed definition of success so that we can conserve the land to support Virginia's continued economic and environmental resilience.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Virginia would greatly benefit from a strong land conservation goal to attract funding and incentives to the critical conservation needs that face us.

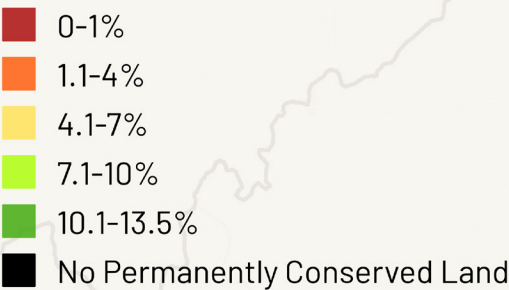
We already have the data, policy tools, history of accomplishments, and practitioners needed to commit to a common goal.

A committed goal to conserve land at a pace of 100,000 acres per year supports our economy and environment and is achievable, ambitious, and balanced across the Commonwealth's communities.

ENDNOTES

1. *Virginia's Protected Lands*. (2026.) Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/land-conservation/protected-lands>
2. *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement 2025*. (2026.) Chesapeake Bay Program. <https://www.chesapeakebay.net/what/what-guides-us/watershed-agreement>
3. *Hydrologic Unit Geography*. (n.d.). Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/soil-and-water/hu>
4. Azhar, A. (2025, December 4). *After missing 2025 goals, Chesapeake Bay leaders agree on longer timeline and tribal role in cleanup*. Inside Climate News. <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/04122025/chesapeake-executive-council-bay-cleanup/>
5. Burgess, K., McConville, D., and Lutz, M. (2024, April 21). *State Policy Leadership to Conserve Nature*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/state-policy-leadership-to-serve-nature/>
6. Cox, J. (2024, May 22). *Maryland marks major land conservation milestone*. Bay Journal. https://www.bayjournal.com/news/growth_conservation/maryland-marks-major-land-conservation-milestone/article_6988b926-18b1-11ef-bb08-c36c263d3e23.html
7. *ConserveVirginia: Virginia's Land Conservation Strategy, Version 3.0*. (2021, October). Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/conservevirginia/conservevirginia-official-v3.pdf>
8. The Nature Conservancy, Virginia Chapter. Unpublished 2025 analysis using GIS data from the U.S. Census on Census Urban Areas and Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation- Division of Natural Heritage data on conserved lands.

CUAs by % Permanently Conserved Land



Map and preliminary analysis by Daniel Kulas, The Nature Conservancy in Virginia

