

SUPPORTING AGRICULTURE

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WHY IT MATTERS

Agriculture is Virginia's largest private industry, with over 7 million acres producing about 8.7% of the state's economic output.¹ Virginia farms produce food and fiber, maintain open space, help mitigate floods, create jobs, unite communities, and support wildlife. While the agricultural sector has made significant progress in reduction of pollution in the past decades, farms still remain the largest contributor of nutrients and sediment to the Chesapeake Bay.²

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 functions, build soil health, and help increase farm profitability by increasing resiliency to adverse weather conditions while improving animal, soil, crop, and forest health. BMPs also aid in efficient nutrient management on farms.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

In 2025, Virginia signed the updated **Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement** and committed to the shared vision of "a Chesapeake Bay region where clean water flows, wildlife thrives and farms, forests and fisheries are healthy and productive". The central role of agriculture and farming is reiterated throughout the new Agreement and is incorporated as a critical sector to achieving outcomes in all four of its goals: 1) thriving habitats, fisheries, and wildlife, 2) healthy landscapes, 3) clean water, and 4) engaged communities.

Virginia provides robust support for farmers to achieve water quality outcomes. 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)**. Each District's trained staff provide technical assistance to farmers and landowners to plan and implement BMPs, and the VACS program helps offset associated costs. VACS helps farmers adopt and implement changes to farm management, infrastructure, and landscapes that result in improved water quality and more productive soils.

Typical farm BMPs include fencing livestock out of streams and installing alternative watering systems, developing nutrient management plans to improve fertilizer use, establishing grass and forested stream buffers to filter pollution from runoff, and using conservation tillage and cover crops that build healthy 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. State cost-share and federal incentive programs have long been used to help farmers adopt BMPs since they can be cost-prohibitive to adopt in the short term.

OPPORTUNITIES

Fully funding the VACS program in the state budget has been a major achievement for Virginia. Continued funding at this level will accelerate water quality and environmental improvements for the entire Commonwealth. The State should embrace the chance to support farmers in adopting BMPs at a time when many farm-related costs have skyrocketed. Environmental improvements could be further advanced if Virginia employs ways to make VACS more efficient and effective at improving water quality and increasing farmer participation.

PRIORITIZING POLLUTION HOTSPOTS

Combining local monitoring and modeling data to identify areas with nutrient imbalances can allow more strategic placement of BMPs and achieve greater reductions in pollution to local waterways.³ Targeting funding for BMPs and technical assistance to these locations would also maximize benefits.

FOCUSING ON UNDERSUBSCRIBED PRACTICES

Additional efforts can help accelerate implementation of BMPs that remain below Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP) targets. Focusing on BMPs with long-term benefits and secondary benefits like wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, and flood mitigation would increase protection of the Commonwealth's natural resources. A dedicated, adequately funded Riparian Forested Buffer initiative, for example, could provide sustained support for one of Virginia's most effective conservation practices.

RECOGNIZING THE ROLE OF SOIL HEALTH

Building healthy soils is a key component of improving water quality outcomes and more resiliency to weather events like flooding and droughts. Prioritizing soil health BMPs on upland farms—particularly in regions of the Commonwealth with strong connectivity between surface water and groundwater—can enhance both water retention and nutrient management.⁴

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TOP TAKEAWAYS

Because of its scale, agriculture contributes significant pollution to local waterways and the Chesapeake Bay. We can reduce that pollution by providing funds for on-farm conservation practices and associated technical assistance, prioritizing funding to identified and measured pollution hotspots.

Prioritizing practices in the VACS program that have long-lasting co-benefits like wildlife habitat and carbon sequestration can maximize protection of natural resources.

Prioritizing BMPs that build soil health benefits farms and 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 Office. <https://cast.chesapeakebay.net/>
3. *Achieving water quality goals in the Chesapeake Bay: A comprehensive evaluation of system response*. (2023). (STAC). Chesapeake Bay Program. <https://www.chesapeake.org/stac/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CESR-Final-update.pdf>
4. *Virginia: Farmers and Farmland are part of the climate solution*. (2022). American Farmland Trust https://farmlandinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/11/AFT_VA_GHG_Brief.pdf

Autumn in Luray, VA

Photo by Chris Anderson

