

VIRGINIA'S NATURAL RESOURCE AGENCIES UNDER STRESS

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WHY IT MATTERS

Virginia's natural resource agencies are tasked with protecting and stewarding the state's natural resources for current and future generations. This includes protecting land, removing invasive plants, conducting scientific research, permitting and monitoring development that can negatively impact our clean air and water, and enforcing laws designed to protect endangered species.

These agencies handle broad and increasingly complex missions, and are frequently tasked by the General Assembly with compounding responsibilities like producing reports, providing expanded services to constituents, investigating emerging threats, and developing new regulations that balance development and growth with irreversible harms to nature.

This expanding mission scope has not been matched with sufficient increases in staff capacity or funding to enable natural resources agencies to fully and successfully complete the work they have been asked to do. Natural resource agencies currently operate with staffing levels that are less than or equal to what they had before the 2008-2009 Great Recession.¹ They are often unable to hire or retain staff for key roles, especially in STEM and leadership positions, due to lengthy hiring processes where applicants often accept other positions that arise in the interim, uncompetitive pay relative to the private sector, and large workloads that lead to burnout. This loss of institutional knowledge and investment in training further hampers the agency, requiring more time and money to find and train new staff.

Virginia is rapidly approaching a point at which its natural resource agencies can no longer fulfill the responsibilities assigned by the General Assembly and meet the needs of Virginians without increased investments.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

VA DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION (DCR)

DCR faces a significant deferred maintenance backlog for state parks, due to inconsistent and insufficient appropriations for capital expenses and staffing over two decades.² DCR needs more engineers and project managers to clear the backlog. This lack of internal capacity requires DCR to contract out many basic maintenance needs. As a result, capital appropriations take longer to spend and don't go as far.

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY (DEQ)

DEQ has made significant strides in deploying technology to increase permitting efficiency and transparency. However, the number of pollutants and threats

to Virginia's lands and water that the agency needs to study, understand, and regulate is growing. For example, successfully curbing PFAS contamination in Virginia's water supply will require additional resources (see *Stopping PFAS at Its Source*, page 27). The withdrawal of federal wetlands permitting and oversight in the wake of the 2024 Sackett v. EPA Supreme Court decision has left a regulatory gap that Virginia must figure out how to fill.³

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE RESOURCES (DWR)

DWR does not receive appropriations from the General Assembly. It is funded through federal dollars, revenues from hunting and fishing license sales, and some dedicated tax revenues.⁴ However, Virginia has among the highest numbers of license exemptions in the country, resulting in the loss of revenue and over \$16 million in matching federal dollars.⁵ DWR is also entitled to 2% of the sales tax revenue collected on hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching equipment, up to a \$13 million cap that has not been updated since 1998 despite a statutory requirement for review every five years.⁶ Rising personnel and technology costs have forced the agency to limit services to maintain core functions.

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY (DOF)

DOF manages 26 state forests, but limited investment in infrastructure and staffing has constrained public access.⁷

VIRGINIA MARINE RESOURCES COMMISSION (VMRC)

VMRC has 17 unfilled law enforcement positions, rendering it unable to fully enforce existing rules to protect marine resources, and the habitat division hasn't added new positions since 2005.⁸

OPPORTUNITIES

Virginia can uphold Article XI of the Virginia constitution by providing adequate appropriations for the state's natural resource agencies and raising the **maximum employment level**.

Increasing appropriations for agency operations can increase operational efficiency and agency health in the long term by reducing burnout, increasing pay for qualified and trained staff, and preventing expensive staff turnover. Increasing in-house capacity and expertise can improve the cost efficiency of capital projects, allowing more funding to be spent on implementation rather than overhead resulting from staffing shortages, project delays, or contracted services.

These agencies provide critical technical, financial, and scientific assistance to localities, private landowners, and environmental organizations. Their work protects Virginians' clean water and air, access to the

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outdoors, and livelihoods. They also protect and steward the state's natural resources so future generations of Virginians can enjoy the same benefits we do today from a healthy environment.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Natural resource agencies are on an unsustainable path due to multiple unfunded mandates from the General Assembly and the increasing complexity of environmental problems.

Natural resource agencies are approaching a point where they must concentrate resources on fulfilling core mission areas at the expense of other constituent services.

Enabling natural resource agencies to provide competitive pay and increase essential staff will reduce turnover, increase operational efficiency, and lead to better outcomes for constituents using agency services.

ENDNOTES

1. Ruiz-Ramón, M. (2026). *Content analysis of Virginia State Budgets FY11-FY26 [Data set]*. Virginia Department of Planning and Budget. <https://budget.lis.virginia.gov/>
2. *Senate of Virginia: SFAC: Capital Outlay & Transportation Subcommittee on 2026-01-16 [Finished]* [Video]. (2026, January 16). Senate of Virginia. <https://www.youtube.com/live/OAXZfYBcBJA?si=NFQIHQom8wf4Q9-X>
3. *Sackett v. Environmental Protection Agency*, 598 U.S. ____ (2023). U.S. Supreme Court. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/598/21-454/>
4. *Annual Report 2025*. (2025). Department of Wildlife Resources. <https://dwr.virginia.gov/about/annual-report/>
5. *Department of Wildlife Resources License Exemption Impacts*. (2026). Department of Wildlife Resources. [Unpublished document].
6. Tax on hunting, fishing and wildlife equipment HB38, Disposition of state sales and use tax revenue Code of Virginia § 58.1-638 (E) (1998). <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title58.1/chapter6/section58.1-638/>
7. *Find a State Forest*. (n.d.). Virginia Department of Forestry. <https://dof.virginia.gov/education-and-recreation/state-forests/virginia-state-forests/>
8. Brown, R., Grist, J., Lasher, T., Rovner, N. (2026, March 23-25). *Agency Directors Panel* [Panel discussion]. Environment Virginia, Lexington, VA, United States.

Blue Ridge Mountain under clouds

Photo by Will Fenwick

