INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is Virginia’s largest industry by many metrics — economic impact, jobs, and land area. However, with approximately 46,000 farms covering 8.2 million acres (32%) of the Commonwealth, agriculture is also the largest source of nutrient and sediment pollution reaching local streams and the Chesapeake Bay. While many well-operated farms employ sound conservation practices that protect water quality, a lack of funding and technical resources prevent many farmers from implementing similar practices. Consequently, excess nutrients, sediment, and bacteria flow into local waterways, including the Chesapeake Bay.

All of these pollutants negatively impact Virginia’s local waterways in unique ways. Nutrient pollution causes large algal blooms that can block sunlight before sinking to the bottom of our waterways to rot. Rotting algae depletes oxygen from the water and can cause dead zones, which impact important commercial fisheries. Some species of algae may even produce toxic compounds harmful to humans. Sediment pollution buries important habitats at the bottom of our waterways, including gravel spawning beds for trout and oyster reefs. Suspended sediment also blocks sunlight from reaching important underwater grasses, which act as habitat for blue crabs and other important aquatic species. Bacterial pollution harms our ability to safely enjoy our rivers and streams and can lead to beach and shellfish harvesting closures, as well as human health risks.

For many of Virginia’s waterways with poor water quality, nutrient, sediment, and bacteria pollution are to blame. The Chesapeake Bay is impaired for nutrients and sediment, and monitoring shows that nearly half of Virginia’s rivers and streams also have impeded water quality, provide technical assistance in addressing those problems through conservation practices, and help cover the cost of installation. These various programs prevent many farmers from implementing more than 50 different types of best management practices (BMPs) to keep pollution from reaching Virginia’s waterways. These BMPs include stream exclusion systems, which keep livestock out of streams while providing alternative water sources; nutrient management plans, which help ensure farmers use a sustainable amount of fertilizer; riparian buffers; conservation tillage; cover crops; and, many other practices essential to protecting our streams, lakes, rivers, and bays.

VACS HAS ASSISTED THOUSANDS OF FARMERS IN IMPLEMENTING MORE THAN 50 DIFFERENT TYPES OF BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES (BMPs) TO KEEP POLLUTION FROM REACHING VIRGINIA’S WATERWAYS

Investments in these agricultural BMPs not only help improve water quality, but they create jobs and deliver economic benefits. Livestock exclusion from streams can prevent calf losses and improve herd health. Increased efficiency of nutrient application helps reduce fertilizer loss while improving crop yield. Conservation tillage, cover crops, rotational grazing, and other practices further improve soil health and productivity. Implementation of these agricultural BMPs supports Virginia’s agricultural economy while restoring the Chesapeake Bay and all of our rivers and streams.

Every other year, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation administers VACS through the Soil and Water Conservation Board and Virginia’s 47 Soil and Water Conservation Districts. The Districts work with farmers and landowners to identify the biggest problems facing their local streams and the Chesapeake Bay. The Districts then provide technical assistance in addressing those problems through conservation practices, and help cover the cost of installation. VACS has assisted thousands of farmers in implementing more than 50 different types of best management practices (BMPs) to keep pollution from this sector. Our waterways are already responding to the improvement. If our state provides a similar level of investment in agricultural BMPs — which are the most cost-effective means of reducing polluted runoff — we can significantly reduce pollution from the agricultural sector and achieve strong water quality benefits for all Virginians.

CONCLUSION

Historically, Virginia’s funding for agricultural BMPs and associated technical assistance has fluctuated significantly from year to year but has always fallen far below the state’s documented need. But, the 2019 General Assembly is poised to make a significant investment in agricultural BMPs across the Commonwealth. Since 2010, Virginia has invested nearly one billion dollars to upgrade wastewater treatment plants, substantially reducing pollution from this sector. Our waterways are already responding to the improvement. If our state provides a similar level of investment in agricultural BMPs — which are the most cost-effective means of reducing polluted runoff — we can significantly reduce pollution from the agricultural sector and achieve strong water quality benefits for all Virginians.

In the 2019 General Assembly, delegates voted to make a significant investment in agricultural BMPs across the Commonwealth. If the General Assembly verifies that Virginia invested nearly one billion dollars to upgrade wastewater treatment plants, substantially reducing pollution from this sector. Our waterways are already responding to the improvement. If our state provides a similar level of investment in agricultural BMPs — which are the most cost-effective means of reducing polluted runoff — we can significantly reduce pollution from the agricultural sector and achieve strong water quality benefits for all Virginians.

Fund the Virginia Agricultural Cost-Share Program at the documented need of $100 million per year according to the Agricultural Needs Assessment.

Uphold consistent and adequate annual funding to ensure certainty for Virginia farmers and those who help them.