PROTECTING VIRGINIA’S LANDSCAPES

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INTRODUCTION
Successful land conservation requires action at all levels to protect the Commonwealth’s working farms and forests, scenic landscapes, natural areas, wildlife habitat, historic resources, and parks and recreational areas. As our population continues to grow, we must continue to grow the number of opportunities Virginians and visitors alike have to access these assets.

Land conservation is critical in achieving measurable goals on protecting water quality, water supply, climate resiliency, and the Chesapeake Bay.

While Virginia offers a variety of programs, there are untapped opportunities available through federal funding, local government programs, and private philanthropic efforts that can bolster our current approaches and aid in delivering lasting results across the Commonwealth.

BACKGROUND
This year marked the 20th anniversary of the passage of the Land Preservation Tax Credit (LPTC) and the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation (VLCF). Both have been incredibly effective in our tool kit. We should be proud of these tools and work to protect and fully fund them. We know Virginians support land conservation. They have said in surveys, polls, and at the ballot box that they want the Commonwealth to capture an estimated $60 million in federal, local, and private matching dollars for the Commonwealth. Lawmakers decided stewardship was an important part of its land investment when a 2% transfer fee from the LPTC was directed to stewardship an important part of its land investment when a 2% transfer fee from the LPTC was directed to stewardship and management. But, a portion of this funding has regularly been diverted to the General Fund. Money that is being diverted to the General Fund could make a significant difference in the stewardship work agencies, local government, and land trusts do.

The Northam administration has announced a strategy for land conservation, aiming to preserve the next 10% of the Commonwealth’s land resources with significant water quality value; and public access. Projects receive more points if they provide riparian buffers. At least 50% of funding must be used for projects with public access. Unfunded projects represent a lost opportunity for the Commonwealth to capture an estimated $60 million in federal, local, and private matching dollars for land conservation.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEDERAL FUNDING
The recent passage of the Farm Bill and the permanent reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund offer new funding opportunities. Virginia should fund fully VLCF and the Virginia Farmland Preservation Fund in order to access these federal funds.

The Farm Bill provides $450 million a year to the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). These funds are available to assist with the purchase of easements that protect the agricultural use and conservation of eligible farmlands, as well as wetland easements. Matching funds are required, and Virginia has not made funding available at a level to be competitive with other states. Over the past five years, Virginia ranks 46th in ACEP funding received.

Virginia needs to step up its investments in land conservation. Otherwise, Virginia will continue to lose the lands that support the backbone of Virginia’s economy: agriculture, forestry and tourism. Without additional funding, Virginia will miss out on the opportunity to grow the 197,000 jobs that depend on our existing outdoor recreation industry.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Land Preservation Tax Credit
- Increase the cap on the tax credit that makes it easier for the Land Preservation Tax Credit (LPTC), a proven and effective land conservation tool; and, The entire 2% of the transfer fee should go to managing the LPTC and stewardship of protected land; no amount should be diverted to the general fund.

Virginia’s Land Conservation Grant Programs
- $16 million for the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation; and
- $2 million for the Virginia Battlefield Preservation Fund; and
- $2 million for the Virginia Farmland Preservation Fund

State Park and Natural Areas
- In 2017, the General Assembly for the first time included restrictions in the state budget that limit where the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) can acquire land. This unnecessarily ties the hands of DCR and could prohibit the acceptance of important lands. These restrictions should be removed in the 2020 budget.