INTRODUCTION

Virginians rely on local waterways for clean drinking water, vibrant communities, and strong economies. Three out of four Virginians rely on healthy headwater streams for their drinking water. Our Commonwealth is the largest seafood producer on the East Coast, with over 50 commercially harvest species. Our outdoor recreation industry is booming, providing 197,000 direct jobs and $12 billion in tax revenue. The James River Park System alone generates over $33 million in income per year for the Richmond region. Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historic Park, stretching along the Potomac River, attracted 4.4 million visitors in 2018 and generated $122 million in economic output for local gateway communities.

Despite our reliance on healthy waterways, polluted runoff — the muddy stew of stormwater, dirt, bacteria, and toxins that runs off streets, roofs, parking lots, and other hard surfaces — continues to threaten our local creeks, streams, and rivers. It remains the fastest growing source of pollution to our waterways. Over its lifespan, SLAF has provided grants to over 50 localities for 271 projects across Virginia, and demand for this program continues to grow. In the most recent round, localities submitted proposals for nearly twice the amount of funding available. The 2019 General Assembly provided $10 million for SLAF but much more is needed to meet our Chesapeake Bay goals. We estimate that the state needs to invest $80 million each year through 2025, based on the cost and performance of past projects, and how much more we still have to do.

AS VIRGINIA'S NEW PHASE III WATERSHED IMPLEMENTATION PLAN POINTS OUT, IT IS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT THAT WE INVEST IN BETTER STORMWATER CONTROL, NOT ONLY TO PROTECT CLEAN WATER, BUT TO PROTECT OUR COMMUNITIES.

A VIEW OF DOWNTOWN CITY OF RICHMOND VIEWED ACROSS THE JAMES RIVER FROM BELLE ISLE.

BACKGROUND

Stormwater runoff from urban and suburban areas is the fastest growing source of pollution to our water and the main reason many of our urban streams are impaired. As Virginia continues to develop, we’ve created more impervious surfaces — parking lots, roofs, and roads — which carry more polluted stormwater runoff to our waterways. 2018 was the wettest year on record for cities and towns across the Commonwealth. With more intense rainfall events on the horizon, untreated stormwater may exacerbate flooding and the potential for loss of life and property damage. As Virginia’s new Phase III Watershed Implementation Plan points out, it is critically important that we invest in better stormwater control, not only to protect clean water, but to protect our communities.

STORMWATER LOCAL ASSISTANCE FUND (SLAF)

Much of our urban and suburban infrastructure was built before we fully understood how stormwater degrades local streams. Nevertheless, many larger localities are now required to reduce the nutrients and sediment that they contribute to Virginia’s waterways. Implementing programs to achieve these reductions — like projects to retrofit older infrastructure — can be expensive. Fortunately, the Virginia General Assembly created the Stormwater Local Assistance Fund (SLAF), a state and local matching grant program that helps localities protect and improve the health of our waterways. Over its lifespan, SLAF has provided grants to over 50 localities for 271 projects across Virginia, and demand for this program continues to grow. In the most recent round, localities submitted proposals for nearly twice the amount of funding available. The 2019 General Assembly provided $10 million for SLAF but much more is needed to meet our Chesapeake Bay goals. We estimate that the state needs to invest $80 million each year through 2025, based on the cost and performance of past projects, and how much more we still have to do.

LOCAL CASE STUDIES

Localities across Virginia have improved the health of their waterways using SLAF grants while achieving important co-benefits like increasing tourism, beautifying public parks, and reducing flooding. Here are just two examples:

• The City of Hopewell restored a wetland to filter the water that flows into the James River. Hopewell used the SLAF grant as a match for a federal National Fish and Wildlife grant, which enabled the city to achieve substantial nutrient reductions while providing a restored park as a city amenity.

• Similarly, the City of Waynesboro restored a wetland using a combination of SLAF and federal funds to achieve significant pollution reductions and meet its permit requirements. The city’s project provides a healthier environment for its citizens while attracting tourists to its lively trout streams.

THE VIRGINIA CONSERVATION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (VCAP)

The Virginia Conservation Assistance Program (VCAP) provides cost-share assistance for smaller-scale residential and commercial projects, such as rain gardens, conservation landscaping, and permeable driveways. VCAP provides financial incentives and technical and educational assistance to property owners to address problems like erosion, poor drainage, or lack of vegetation. Since the program began in 2002, Virginia’s Soil and Water Conservation Districts and their partners have installed over 387 projects. Another 41 projects have been approved and are in the construction phase for a total of 428 stormwater best management practices (BMPs).

However, there are <5 projects — worth $366,000 — in a project application backlog currently awaiting funding. Property owners, businesses, schools, and localities have come to rely on VCAP as a cost-effective method of addressing erosion and polluted stormwater runoff in their communities while helping to engage and educate the public. Last year, the General Assembly included $1 million to support VCAP projects across the state. Consistent, stable funding is an important part of encouraging property owners to participate.

STORMWATER DEFENSE

Virginia’s stormwater technical rules that took effect in July 2014 are designed to minimize pollution from new construction. These rules help us slow the growth of polluted runoff from our urban and suburban areas. However, our stormwater management program comes under attack every year. Virginia’s legislators must remain strong in their commitment to maintain, enforce, and where possible, improve the program.

CONCLUSION

Cities and towns, churches and schools, homeowners and developers — everyone has a role to play in keeping nutrient and sediment pollution out of our stormwater. The state can and should encourage pollution reduction practices by providing strong funding support and protecting our existing stormwater management regulations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Allocate at least $80 million each year for the Stormwater Local Assistance Fund to invest in pollution reduction projects and help localities meet their local water quality needs on time.

Provide consistent and adequate funding for the Virginia Conservation Assistance Program to restore the creeks and streams our children play in; create habitat for birds, bees, and other pollinators; reduce localized flooding; and protect property values.

Protect Virginia’s Stormwater Management Program to promote smarter development and flood resilient communities.

TACKLING POLLUTED STORMWATER RUNOFF AND RESTORING LOCAL WATER QUALITY

Kasey Poggioli, Virginia League of Conservation Voters

Danielle Simms // Virginia League of Conservation Voters

Karen Forget // Lynnhaven River NOW | Anna Killius // James River Association