

CONSERVATION AND THE VIRGINIA SPECIAL SESSION

2020 ENVIRONMENTAL BRIEFING BOOK
SPECIAL EDITION

a publication of Virginia Conservation Network



103 East Main Street, Suite #1
Richmond, VA 23219
vcn@vcnva.org
804.644.0283
vcnva.org

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ABOUT VCN

Founded as the Conservation Council of Virginia in 1969, Virginia Conservation Network (VCN) began as a roundtable of major conservation groups and has grown to include over 125 Network Partners across the Commonwealth. VCN is committed to building a powerful, diverse, and highly-coordinated conservation movement focused on protecting our Commonwealth's natural resources.

VCN is a facilitator of strategic action, a resource for Network Partners statewide, and a constant conservation presence in Virginia's Capitol. Playing a unique role in Virginia's conservation community, VCN helps the community speak with one coordinated voice. The organization and its staff focus on strengthening the conservation community as a whole and winning environmental victories that benefit all Virginians.

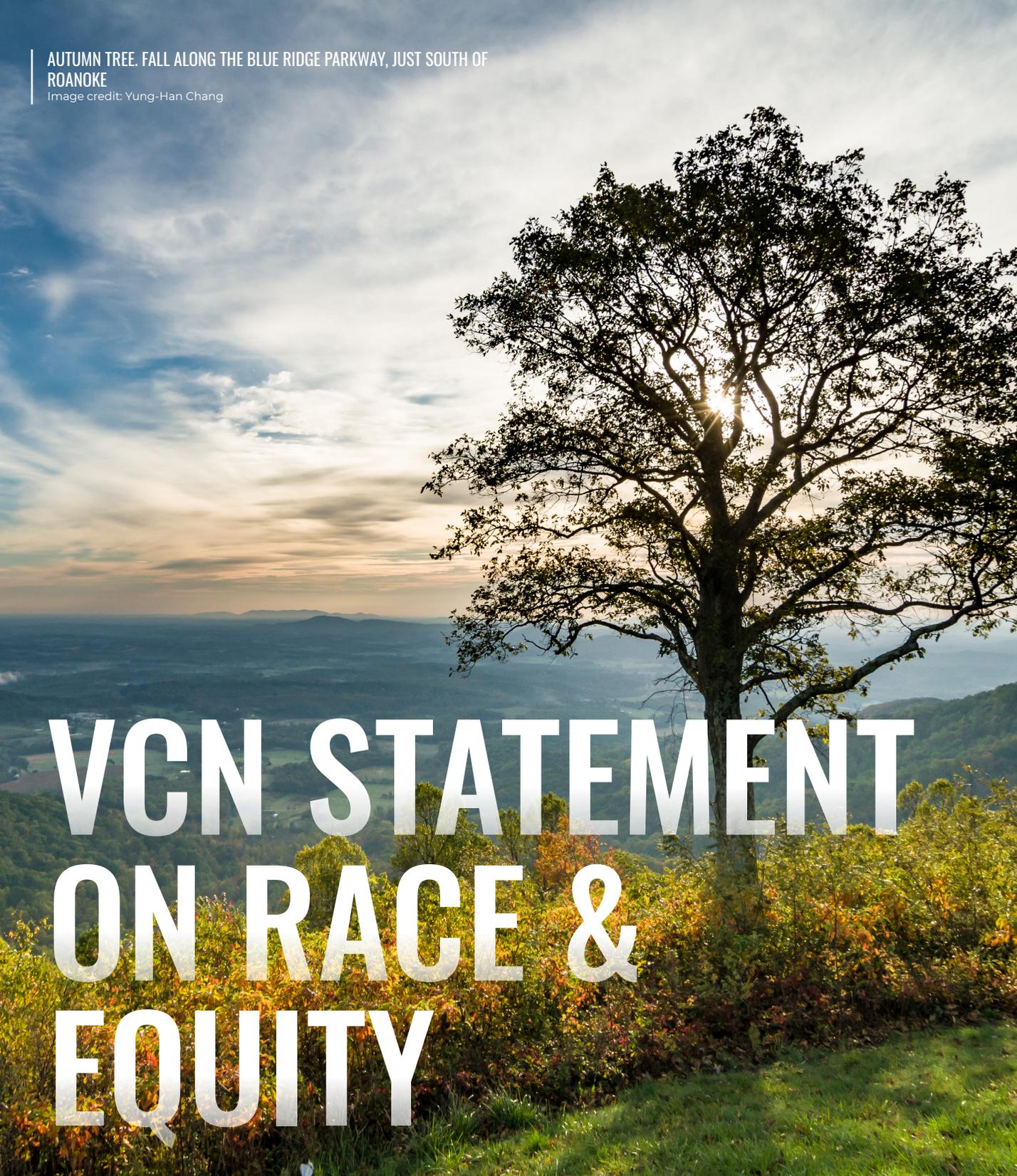
VCN's Network Partners work on a wide range of issues from stream restoration, to transportation reform, to renewable energy advancement, to promoting sustainable community growth, and more. Given the diverse work of our partner organizations, VCN organizes its programs into four main categories: **HEALTHY RIVERS, CLEAN ENERGY AND CLIMATE, LAND CONSERVATION,** and **LAND USE AND TRANSPORTATION.**



VCN is proud to serve as the state lead for the Choose Clean Water Coalition — the regional coalition advocating for clean rivers and streams in communities throughout the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, — as the Virginia state affiliate for the National Wildlife Federation, and as a member of the Virginia Environmental Justice Council.

AUTUMN TREE. FALL ALONG THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY, JUST SOUTH OF
ROANOKE

Image credit: Yung-Han Chang



VGN STATEMENT ON RACE & EQUITY



A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Virginia Conservation Network would like to thank Governor Northam for calling this special session, and all members of the Virginia General Assembly for taking the time to address the pressing issues facing the Commonwealth during this unprecedented time.

This special edition, mini-Briefing Book is focused mainly on the importance of maintaining hard-earned conservation policies enacted including investments in the budget which are critical to protecting our health and our natural landscapes.

In sharing this resource with lawmakers, VCN would like to first recognize the important discussions around public health and racial justice that will be front and center during this special session and our role in creating a more equitable and just Virginia.

VCN recognizes that structural racism exists not only within our Commonwealth but has also historically existed within the broader conservation community - and at times, while unintentional, within policies we have supported. Our Network has committed to listen, reflect, and focus on dismantling the inequitable structures within our own organizations while building out a more inclusive movement that lifts up leaders and communities of color.

Winning environmental victories that benefit all Virginians means communities of color should not bear the brunt of pollution - including poor air quality and increased toxins in drinking water. It means that Black Virginians should feel welcomed to enjoy our parks and trails without fear that they will be harassed or worse that they or their children will be murdered by police or be the victims of police brutality. It means Black families in Virginia should have just as much of an opportunity to own, manage, and build wealth from the growth of sustainable agriculture, outdoor recreation, clean energy and other burgeoning green industries as white families. We look forward to working within our network as well as with other justice and equity alliances to enact policy solutions that help us reach this vision.

During this special session and beyond, we commit to looking for ways we can be supportive of policies that help break down systems of environmental injustice and lift up communities of color including, but not limited to, our support of the Commonwealth recognizing racism as a public health crisis.

The Virginia Conservation Network wishes to restate our support of the Black Lives Matter movement and thank the Legislative Black Caucus and justice advocates across Virginia for their tireless effort to work on policies which work to dismantle systemic racism in our Commonwealth. We look forward to working with all of Virginia's lawmakers and agencies to protect and enhance environmental protections for all Virginians while our policies and outreach help ensure Virginia is an equitable and just place to live.

Mary Rafferty
Executive Director

PROTECTING CONSERVATION GAINS IN THE 2020 BUDGET

OVERVIEW

Investing in our natural resources is essential to ensure every Virginian has access to clean air, clean water, and our natural landscapes. This is particularly true as our Commonwealth and the nation face an unprecedented public health crisis. We recognize that due to the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commonwealth must balance budget priorities with the shortfall in forecasted revenues. As the General Assembly determines what cuts to maintain, we urge legislators to keep in mind that investments in natural resources will not only further our longstanding environmental goals, but will help relieve the economic and health-related impacts of our prolonged battle with this pandemic. To this end, we should maintain the investments as closely to the originally passed budget as possible.

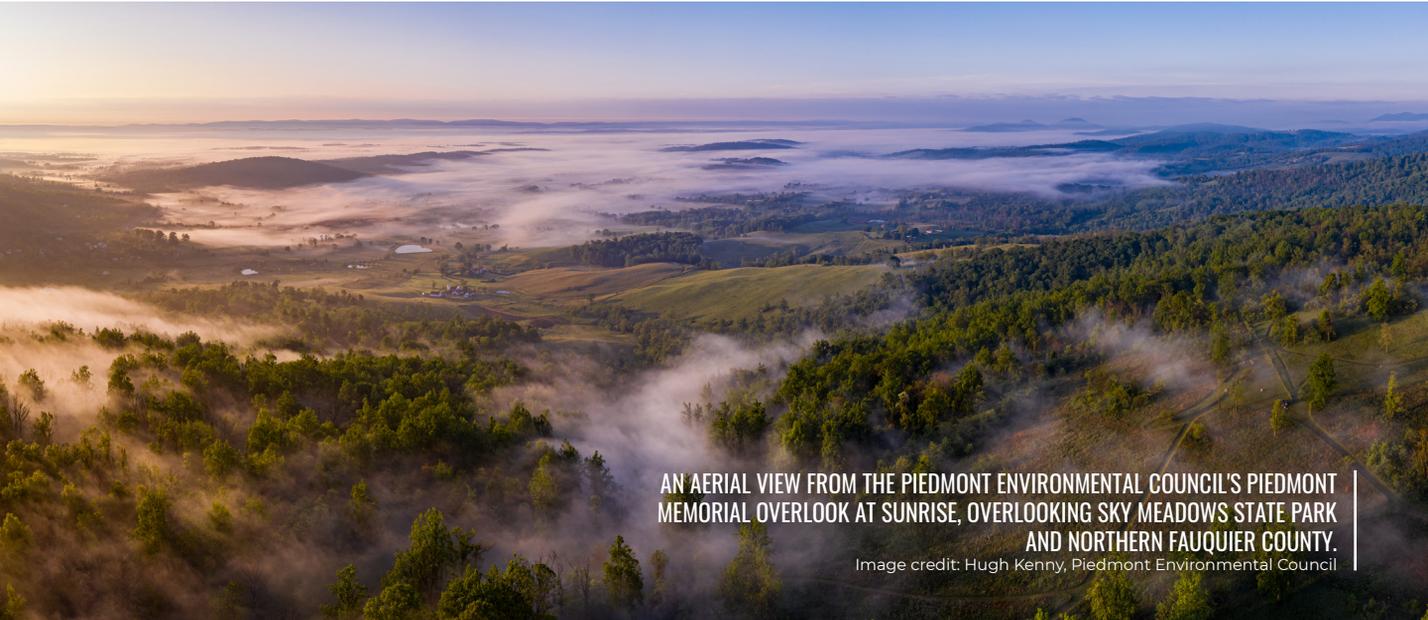
BACKGROUND

The conservation community's 2021 budget priorities - as expressed last summer - reflected a commitment to Virginia's responsibilities under the Chesapeake Bay cleanup effort, continued investment in our land conservation programs, and a restoration of the natural resources agencies tasked with protecting clean air and clean water for all. In addition, as Virginia makes a

just transition to a carbon-free future, VCN supported new transportation funding formulas that invest in public transit over unnecessary highway and road construction. We believed then - and do now - that all of these priorities would pay tremendous dividends for the health of our environment, our economy, and our communities.

We fully understand that the General Assembly is called upon now to address the economic hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, facing a revenue shortfall, and immediate public health needs. VCN and our partners encourage the Legislature to look for innovative ways to increase revenues if possible. But where gaps remain, we recognize that some of the unallotments included in the biennial budget this spring might not be fully restored. We hope that in making these decisions, the General Assembly will consider the holistic value of each program and the role that natural resource protection can play in combating this pandemic through better public health and renewed economic growth.

As legislators look to balance the budget during this uncertain economic moment, VCN and its partners commend the public health and economic benefits of the priorities in the following pages.



AN AERIAL VIEW FROM THE PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL'S PIEDMONT
MEMORIAL OVERLOOK AT SUNRISE, OVERLOOKING SKY MEADOWS STATE PARK
AND NORTHERN FAUQUIER COUNTY.

Image credit: Hugh Kenny, Piedmont Environmental Council



BALD CYPRESS AT SUNRISE ON THE NORTH LANDING RIVER, VIRGINIA BEACH.

Image credit: Erik Moore

MEETING OUR CHESAPEAKE BAY GOALS

Restoring Virginia's rivers and streams is crucial to remaining on track to meet our Chesapeake Bay cleanup goals by 2025 - a decades-long effort by Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, the District of Columbia, and Virginia. **We should continue to invest in programs that help working farms, ensure localities meet their clean water requirements, and create jobs restoring infrastructure, including:**

- the Virginia Agriculture Cost Share program;
- the Stormwater Local Assistance Fund; and
- funding to upgrade the nutrient pollution reduction capabilities of wastewater facilities.

WHY INVESTING IN THE CHESAPEAKE BAY CLEANUP MATTERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

After decades of significant work and investment, Virginia is on pace to achieve its goals by 2025. Any delays to the programs and projects that restore our waterways postpone our ability to enjoy the public health benefits of cleaner water.

Clean water programs are also significant economic drivers and job creators. A University of Virginia study found that every dollar of public investment in agricultural best management practices can generate \$1.56 in economic activity in the Commonwealth, helping recapitalize farms and sustain employment in the food supply system. Stormwater pollution control projects can create thousands of construction and engineering jobs. A 2011 projection from the Economic Policy Institute estimated that stormwater projects could provide 178,000 full-time jobs over the next five years.

PROTECTING OUR LANDSCAPES AND CREATING ACCESS TO THE OUTDOORS FOR ALL

Successful land conservation requires coordination and resources at all levels to protect the Commonwealth's working farms and forests, urban natural areas, scenic landscapes, wildlife habitats, historic resources, and parks and recreational areas. These protected landscapes safeguard our game and nongame wildlife, keep our waterways clean, and help spur our outdoor recreation economy. **Virginia should continue to invest in the Virginia Land Conservation Fund (VLCF) and the Land Preservation Tax Credit.**

WHY INVESTING IN THE PROTECTION OF OUR LANDSCAPES MATTERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

With many people getting outside for solace during this troubling time, the value of nature and clean water to public and mental health is undeniable. A 2014 study conducted by the University of Michigan found that nature walks are linked to significantly lowering depression, lessening perceived stress, and enhancing mental health and well-being. Despite the countless health and emotional benefits, access to green space remains unavailable to many communities. Investment will help ensure outdoor access for all, and support an outdoor recreation industry that contributes more than \$21.9 billion to Virginia's economy.

SECLUDED BEACH NOOK ON THE OCCOQUAN RESERVOIR

Image credit: Amy Hagedorn





POPPIES AND MUSTARD BLOOM IN A FARM FIELD IN PAGE COUNTY, VA.

Image credit: Chris Anderson

RESTORING AND ENHANCING OUR NATURAL RESOURCES AGENCIES

Virginia's natural resources agencies have suffered decades of cuts, especially the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). Under Executive Order 6, Governor Northam conducted a full review of DEQ's needs and proposed a budget with the funding necessary to ensure monitoring, enforcement, and equitable public outreach, including \$2.5 million for environmental justice and outreach initiatives. **The General Assembly should continue to look for ways to restore funding to DEQ to meet these needs.**

WHY INVESTING IN OUR NATURAL RESOURCES AGENCIES MATTERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a disproportionate impact on communities of color in Virginia. These same communities bear the brunt of impacts from air and water pollution. A lack of monitoring and enforcement of key environmental protections, coupled with poor public engagement, will only increase the adverse public health impacts these communities are facing in the midst of this public health crisis, continuing to perpetuate the trend of environmental racism.

TRANSFORMING TRANSPORTATION

Transportation is the largest source of carbon pollution in the Commonwealth. During last session, Virginia locked in a plan to get to zero carbon pollution from the utility sector by 2045 while also providing a record amount of new funding for transit and rail - an important investment in cleaner transportation alternatives. **The General Assembly should keep these landmark achievements.**

WHY INVESTING IN TRANSFORMING TRANSPORTATION MATTERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Air pollution directly harms water quality and increases the risk of mortality - particularly for respiratory illnesses such as COVID-19. We also cannot adequately address the climate crisis we face without significantly reducing carbon pollution from transportation. In addition, our transit agencies - many of which saw record ridership ahead of the pandemic - continue to serve essential workers despite the challenges to protect their employees and stay afloat. For all of these reasons, we cannot lose the progress we recently made in funding cleaner transportation options and we need to build upon this progress through steps, such as funding zero-fare transit in order to protect essential workers, transit operators, and the broader public.

CONCLUSION

We thank the Virginia General Assembly for their tireless work to protect our public health and our economic future during these uncertain times. Wherever possible, we urge our leaders to maintain funding for the conservation programs that ensure healthier communities with clean water to drink, clean air to breath, and protected outdoor landscapes to enjoy, while supporting local jobs and economic recovery. And we look forward to working with each and every legislator to prioritize public health and safety for their constituents.



SUNSET OVER FARMLAND IN GREENE COUNTY, VA.

Image credit: Harlow Chandler

OUR PARTNERS

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BALD EAGLE



**AMERICAN
BATTLEFIELD
TRUST** ★ ★ ★
PRESERVE. EDUCATE. INSPIRE.



**CHESAPEAKE BAY
FOUNDATION**
Saving a National Treasure



Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project, Inc.



**SIERRA
CLUB**
VIRGINIA CHAPTER



**VIRGINIA LEAGUE OF
CONSERVATION VOTERS**



**Piedmont
Environmental
Council**



**Southern
Environmental
Law Center**

CARDINAL

Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay · Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley · Appalachian Citizens' Law Center · Blue Ridge Land Conservancy · Community Climate Collaborative · Environment Virginia · Friends of the Rappahannock · Generation 180 · James River Association · James River Garden Club · Lynnhaven River Now · Natural Resources Defense Council · Potomac Conservancy · Powered by Facts · Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation · The Nature Conservancy in Virginia · Valley Conservation Council · Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center Foundation · Wildlands Network

TIGER SWALLOWTAIL BUTTERFLY

Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance · Appalachian Trail Conservancy · Appalachian Voices · Audubon Naturalist Society · Audubon Society of Northern Virginia · Center for Progressive Reform · Chesapeake Climate Action Network (CCAN) · Clean Fairfax Council · Clean Virginia · Coalition for Smarter Growth · Edith J. Carrier Arboretum at JMU · Foundation Earth · Friends of the North Fork of the Shenandoah River · Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy · Mothers Out Front · New Virginia Majority · Northern Virginia Conservation Trust · Oceana · Pew Charitable Trust · Potomac Riverkeeper Network · Preservation Virginia · Richmond Audubon Society · Roanoke River Basin Association · Scenic Virginia · Shenandoah National Park Trust · SouthWings · Spotswood Garden Club · Trust for Public Land · Tuckahoe Garden Club of Westhampton · Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke · UVA School of Law, Environmental and Regulatory Law Clinic · VaULT · Virginia Assoc. of Soil & Water Conservation Districts · Virginia Clinicians for Climate Action · Virginia Environmental Justice Collaborative · Virginia Interfaith Power and Light · Virginia Living Museum · Virginia Native Plant Society · Waterkeepers Chesapeake (WKC) · Wetlands Watch

DOGWOOD

1Planet · Albemarle Garden Club · Ashland Garden Club · Black Family Land Trust · Blue Ridge Garden Club · Boxwood Garden Club · Capital Region Land Conservancy · Citizens for a Fort Monroe National Park · Climate Action Alliance of the Valley · Clinch Coalition · Conservation Park of Virginia, Inc. · Drive Electric RVA · Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions · Fauquier & Loudoun Garden Club · Friends of Accotink Creek · Friends of Dyke Marsh · Friends of the Rivers of Virginia · Garden Club of Norfolk · Garden Club of the Middle Peninsula · Garden Club of the Northern Neck · Goose Creek Association · Hands Across the Lake · Hunting Creek Garden Club · Leesburg Garden Club · Mattaponi & Pamunkey Rivers Association · Mill Mountain Garden Club · Nelson County Garden Club · Old Dominion Smallmouth Club · Partnership for Smarter Growth · Rail Solution · Rappahannock League for Environmental Protection · Rappahannock Valley Garden Club · Rivanna Conservation Alliance · Rivanna Garden Club · Rockbridge Area Conservation Council · Rockfish Valley Foundation · Shenandoah Green · Sierra Club · Piedmont Group · Sierra Club · Potomac Region · Sierra Club · York River Group · Sierra Club - Falls of the James Group · Sierra Club - Blue Ridge Group · Sierra Club - Chesapeake Bay Group · Sierra Club - Great Falls Group · Sierra Club - Mount Vernon Group · Sierra Club - New River Valley Group · Sierra Club - Rappahannock Group · Sierra Club - Roanoke Group · Sierra Club - Shenandoah Group · Surfriider Foundation · Virginia Chapter · Virginia Association for Environmental Education · Virginia Association of Biological Farming · Virginia Bicycling Federation · Virginia Chapter of the Wildlife Society · Virginia Composting Council · Virginia Council of Trout Unlimited · Virginia Green Travel Alliance · Virginia Society of Ornithology · Virginia Wilderness Committee · Wild Virginia · Williamsburg Garden Club · Winchester Clarke Garden Club



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