

Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
Legislative Agenda for 2019 General Assembly
Approved by VASWCD Membership 12.4.18

1. **Increase Operating Funds for the 47 districts.** This includes funding for district administrative and technical staff to address on-going, technical assistance requests such as those for the Virginia Agricultural Cost Share Program, Resource Management Plan Program, dam safety, stream bank stabilization, soil inventories, ponds, assistance to non-agricultural property owners, etc., and to meet identified needs for district operations based upon the annual “budget template” requests for a \$35 million cost share program. Soil and Water Conservation Districts are the local program delivery mechanism for nonpoint source pollution control throughout the Commonwealth. Currently, the district appropriation is \$7,191,091 for subprogram 50320. The increase is \$5,611,400 per year plus \$6,174,300 for technical which totals \$18,976,800 for each year of the 2019 – 2020 biennium. Without adequate funding, conservation districts continue to find it especially difficult to meet the critical need to retain highly trained, experienced and skilled employees who are the primary delivery mechanism for programs to meet the Commonwealth’s water quality goals established by the Governor and General Assembly. Strong local conservation districts are needed to play a key role as Virginia intensifies its efforts to reduce nonpoint sources of pollution throughout the Commonwealth and to meet the goals of the Chesapeake Bay TMDL.

As efforts to reduce nonpoint sources of pollution intensify, district funding needs to increase. As noted in the DCR Strategic plan, “For Virginia to achieve its Bay TMDL and other water quality goals, increased funding to the Districts for service delivery and increased constituent outreach will be a critical element.”

2. **Establish a dedicated and adequate, secure and stable source of funding for the Virginia Natural Resources Commitment Fund (VNRCF)** commensurate with the most recent Agriculture Needs Assessment Report and the most recent Chesapeake Bay and Virginia Waters Clean Up Plan Report. Currently the VNRCF is funded on a year to year basis, often times relying entirely on unpredictable, year-end, state budget surplus.

We support the creation of a dedicated revenue source for those on-the-ground practices (BMPs) and the retention of the certified professional employees which represent front line efforts to meet Virginia’s challenges outlined by the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Improvement Plan (WIP). Twenty years after the creation of the Water Quality Improvement Act and more than eleven years after the creation of the VNRCF, Virginia’s commitments to the WIP and TMDL Virginia are highly reliant on high performing SWCDs. To carry out district responsibilities, the retention and adequate compensation, commensurate with workload, of seasoned, highly valued and highly competent employees are not only the to priority for conservation districts but an essential ingredient to Virginia’s success. We support a minimum of \$35 million annually for a stable, reliable cost share program, while realizing the full cost according to the 2018 Fall Ag Needs Assessment report to the stakeholders group has been identified as greater than \$100 million.

3. **Support urban cost share programming as a means to addressing WIP and TMDL needs: Request \$1,000,000 for the establishment of a statewide Virginia Urban Retrofit Best Management Practices Cost Share and Tax Credit Program.** The program would complement the Agricultural BMP Cost Share Program. SWCDs, with appropriately qualified, trained and experienced staff, are well-positioned and capable of implementing a voluntary urban BMP cost share and tax credit program for private commercial and residential landowners. The Urban Program would be carried out in a manner similar to the Agricultural BMP program. The program is currently implemented as a grant-funded pilot program within the Chesapeake Bay. Virginia’s Phase II Watershed Implementation Plan recognizes a need for urban/residential BMPs in its “Local Implementation Strategies for Urban/Suburban Source Sector”, including a cost share program strategy. [The VCAP Program could serve as a template for developing a statewide urban cost-sharing program.]

4. **Resource Management Plan Program (RMP).** Legislation authorizing the development of Resource Management Plans to create “safe harbor” from any future regulatory change was passed by the 2011 Virginia General Assembly. RMP’s are currently being marketed to agriculture producers in Virginia. The review, approval and implementation responsibilities that RMP’s bring to conservation districts poorly funded. Current efforts are underway at the state level to significantly increase implementation. We support \$650,000 be provided to ensure timely plan review and implementation to assure the RMP program can meet expectations.
5. **Advance Environmental Education.** Support appropriating \$250,000 and two positions from the general fund in order to implement recommendations outlined in the December 12, 2017 report from the Secretaries of Natural Resources and Education. As described in the report, the funds would be used to designate a state coordinator for Environmental Education in the Department of Education and a lead natural resource agency, whose responsibilities would include, being a point of contact in state government by supporting communication, fostering collaboration between formal and informal education, providing a “depot” for lesson plans for K-12 and beyond, offering professional development opportunities and managing and maintaining the resources outlined in the remainder of the report.
6. **Dam Rehabilitation.** Twelve SWCDs in Virginia own and operate 104 small watershed flood control dams. Necessary financial resources assist conservation districts in meeting state requirements and providing for public safety and flood control. A recent study shows that many of these dams do not meet Virginia Dam Safety Regulations. Although a few of these dams are currently in the process for rehabilitation with NRCS approximately 45 high hazard dams still require assistance. As local sponsors of these federally funded watershed projects, without the means to levy funding, districts need adequate state support. **We support the creation of a state rehabilitation program that is adequately staffed, adequately equipped and with a steady stream of construction funds for the actual rehabilitation work.**
7. **Request \$100,000 for an urban nutrient management specialist at the Department of Conservation & Recreation.** A new FTE would support conservation efforts for equines that are currently underway including conducting research and providing educational workshops for equine owners related to pasture management and manure management best management practices. The position would work closely with the Agricultural BMP Technical Advisory Committee and the newly-formed Equine Workgroup to coordinate implementation of recommendations related to best management practices for equine operations. The position would also provide nutrient management plans to equine owners and to large turf operations that would help ensure that necessary nutrient reductions from such operations are achieved to help reach Virginia's Chesapeake Bay and local water quality goals.
8. **Impacts of Hurricane Michael and other significant rainfall events have highlighted the need for remote monitoring of District owned dams.** District-owned dams are typically located in remote locations and District staff have difficulty monitoring the dams during storms. An increased appropriation of \$690,000 in the Soil & Water Conservation District Dam Maintenance, Repair, and Rehabilitation fund to provide for the purchase and installation of remote monitoring equipment for all District-owned high hazard dams.

Other Issues:

Federal Initiative: **Maintain the current level of 319 funding for Virginia and seek higher levels of 319 funding in future federal budgets.** VASWCD and individual districts will pursue an active role in securing higher levels of federal 319 funds for Virginia. This can be implemented by both actively supporting NACD efforts and by direct communication with Virginia’s Federal Congressional Representatives. Strategies should include contacts from individual districts. Currently demand for 319 funds outpaces that available for TMDL Implementation Projects. Efforts to secure higher levels of 319 funds should be coordinated with TMDL Program Manager.