



**Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts 2020 Legislative Agenda
Approved by Full Membership December 10, 2019**

1. **Increase Operating Funds for the 47 districts.** Soil and Water Conservation Districts are the local program delivery mechanism for nonpoint source pollution control throughout the Commonwealth. Currently, district appropriation is \$7,191,091. An increase of \$3.3 million per year is needed in addition to a shift in funding to stabilize Technical Assistance at a level of 13% or \$4.55 million on a minimum \$35 million cost share program. This includes funding for:

- District Central Operations
- Administrative Assistance
- Technical Assistance to implement agricultural and urban best management practices (BMPs)
- Technical Assistance to operate and maintain 104 flood control dams
- Technical Assistance to implement Resource Management Plans including review and verification
- Support for environmental education programs

and meets identified needs for district operations based upon the annual “budget template” requests. 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.

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 2019 Fall Ag Needs Assessment and 2019 VA Forever Five Year Plan has been identified as greater than \$100 million.

3. **Continue support for urban best management practices as a means to addressing WIP and TMDL needs: Request \$2,000,000 for the Virginia Conservation Assistance Program (VCAP).** The program complements 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. Virginia's Phase III Watershed Implementation Plan recognizes the program as a key means to meeting urban water quality improvement needs.

4. **Dam Rehabilitation: Dam rehabilitation to initiate projects on district flood control dams that do not meet current safety regulations totals \$50 million for the biennium.** 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.
5. **Provide \$560,000 for remote flood control dam monitoring systems to complete outfitting the remaining high and significant hazard district owned dams.** In FY2020, \$400,000 is available for the highest priority dams. 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.
6. **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 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 the necessary nutrient reductions from such operations are achieved to help reach Virginia's Chesapeake Bay local water quality goals.
7. **Advance Environmental Education.** Support appropriating \$250,000 and two positions from the general fund in order to implement recommendations outlined in the December 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 in 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 the lesson plans for K-12 and beyond, offering professional development opportunities and managing and maintain the resources outlined in the remainder of the report.

Other Issues:

- **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.
- **Expand Septic Cost Share Programs.** Septic programs are a means to addressing Chesapeake Bay WIP needs. Funds are needed in TMDL and non-TMDL areas.