

Virginia Tree Canopy Action Plan

Background

In March 2023, the [Chesapeake Bay Watershed Tree Canopy Funding and Policy Roundtable](#) convened 125 local and state leaders from across the Chesapeake Bay Watershed to address challenges and opportunities in advancing tree canopy goals throughout the region. Centered around the themes of equity, climate resilience, and tree loss, the event featured expert presentations as well as generative discussions to identify data, tools and approaches to strengthen tree canopy outcomes. The Roundtable was intended to lay the groundwork for each Chesapeake Bay state to develop a two-year **Tree Canopy Action Plan** that pinpoints priority funding, policy, and programmatic strategies to advance tree canopy goals.

Virginia’s Priority Strategies

The priority strategies presented below were identified by a group of stakeholders from Virginia who participated in pre- and post-Roundtable tree canopy strategy sessions and/or in discussion sessions at the Roundtable. These strategies were identified as having strong potential to advance tree canopy progress in Virginia in the near term. For each strategy, action steps and potential partners were identified.

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1. Advocate for the VA Legislature to prioritize tree canopy and to improve tree canopy data and tracking.

Under current Virginia law, municipalities are limited in their ability to adopt and implement regulations to protect and expand urban tree canopy. Legislative change would be needed in order for local governments to adopt tree ordinances and/or establish canopy cover goals. In addition, coalition-building and increased advocacy efforts are needed to pass future proposed tree protection legislation and to improve statewide tree canopy data and tracking on urban tree canopy and riparian forest buffers gained, lost, distributed, and maintained.

Opportunities for action	Who's involved
<p>Continue the efforts of the Virginia Conservation Network workgroup to gain consensus on what conservation entities in VA should collectively advocate to the VA Legislature (such as a statewide canopy goal; required consultation with DOF for solar projects impacting large tracts of forested land; improved data and tracking).</p> <p>Finalize the workgroup's policy paper on recommendations to protect and expand tree canopy in Virginia, and share with partners, especially with VaCo and VML to seek platform alignment.</p>	<p>Chesapeake Bay Foundation (leading the workgroup)</p> <p>Virginia Conservation Network</p> <p>Virginia Forestry Association</p> <p>Other conservation partners in VA</p>
<p>Invite conservation partners to present at meetings of the Virginia Association of Counties (VaCo) and the Virginia Municipal League (VML), to help educate VaCo/VML members regarding regulatory options for protecting trees.</p> <p>Ask these partners to write newsletters, provide webinars, or do other outreach and education. Target messaging to the venue ((storm planning, economic development, forestry, etc).</p>	<p>Virginia Association of Counties</p> <p>Virginia Municipal League</p> <p>Possible speakers / content-creators: Trees Virginia; DOF Urban and Community Forestry; Green Infrastructure Center, Virginia Science Center</p>
<p>Broadly share data from Chesapeake Bay Program Tree Cover Status & Change factsheets, which quantify and visualize tree loss by county.</p>	<p>All partners to share factsheets</p>

2. Strengthen local codes and regulations to protect tree canopy.

Virginia municipalities need assistance understanding their authority to strengthen codes and regulations to protect tree canopy – as well as implementing these changes.

Opportunities for action	Who's involved
<p>Develop a set of templates to help Virginia localities add tree canopy language to their comprehensive plans and emergency management plans; use the Green Infrastructure Center's guidebook of local recommendations as a starting point. Integrate existing resources on pre-disaster contract standards for debris removal and tree replacement.</p>	<p>DOF Virginia Department of Emergency Management Virginia Tech Extension Green Infrastructure Center</p>
<p>Update the Virginia Tree Ordinance Database and Tree Ordinance Legislative Guide; highlight urban tree canopy-related regulatory actions that Virginia localities are authorized to enact.</p>	<p>DOF Virginia Tech</p>
<p>Promote the DOF Community Forest Revitalization Program to provide direct support to communities including for code and ordinance audits and revisions.</p>	<p>DOF (in progress)</p>
<p>Provide technical assistance to towns to (1) conduct code and ordinance audits, using the guidance reference above and (2) adapt their codes and plans.</p>	<p>Planning District Commissions (provide assistance) Chesapeake Bay Program pass-through funding to Virginia DEQ/PDCs (includes stipulation to support localities in conducting code audits)</p>
<p>Communicate to municipalities and counties about the above resources and/or available code revision options.</p>	<p>CBF Virginia Conservation Network</p>

3. Implement incentives for tree conservation within the development community and on private property.

There is a need to identify feasible and effective incentives for tree canopy protection during development, as well as to continue offering education and financial incentives for private landowners to conserve their trees.

Opportunities for action	Who's involved
Adopt the proposed tree BMP stormwater standard and promulgate the regulation, as a critical incentive for development to integrate trees into MS4 plans.	VA DEQ
Create a short education document for the General Assembly, drawing from findings in the forthcoming Virginia Conservation Network whitepaper regarding ways to incentivize site tree and natural resources inventories to be conducted <i>prior</i> to a site plan being submitted for review.	Virginia Conservation Network
Increase awareness about tree giveaway programs for private property owners, including DOF's Virginia Trees for Clean Water grant program .	DOF - VTCW Program Local tree distribution programs
Continue to share existing DOF and Tree Stewards materials related to (1) the economic value of trees, and (2) ways to mitigate perceived risks of trees.	DOF Tree Stewards
Convene a roundtable of homebuilders and the development community to identify feasible and effective incentives for tree canopy protection during development; emphasize opportunities related to stormwater BMPs.	CBF (convener)
Investigate opportunities to positively incentivize the value of keeping land forested.	Lead TBD

4. Amend state funding and financing programs (SRF, SLAF, VCAP) to prioritize tree canopy protection.

Virginia funding programs for water quality do not always prioritize tree canopy (the Clean Water State Revolving Fund prioritizes wastewater; the Stormwater Local Assistance Fund prioritizes nutrient removal sometimes at the expense of trees; and the Virginia Conservation Assistance Program does not fund small planting projects).

Opportunities for action	Who's involved
Convene a meeting of the DEQ Stormwater Local Assistance Fund managers to discuss state funding restrictions and explore potential improvements (for example, adding co-benefits scoring criteria for SLAF to link together water quality, tree benefits, climate, human health, etc. and/or providing upfront planning grants to restore urban tree canopy).	DEQ
Update the Community Flood Preparedness Fund to prioritize resilience and trees as a stormwater BMP credit.	Lead TBD
Develop a communication strategy to accompany the forthcoming revised stormwater manual (with the addition of the tree BMP), to share the message in an easily digestible manner. Present at conferences identified by members of the SAG.	DEQ
Investigate the possibilities of amending VCAP so that small planting projects (or bundled projects) are eligible for funding.	VCAP

5. Promote workforce and business development to expand capacity of trained tree planting and maintenance workers.

Virginia needs additional trained workers to plant and maintain trees in urban areas and buffer areas, and this need is expected to increase given new funding for urban trees and the addition of trees as an approved BMP for stormwater management permits.

Opportunities for action	Who's involved
Launch Department of Forestry's planned grant program focused on large workforce development for riparian buffer planting statewide.	VDOF (in progress)
Advocate for continued and sustained funding for the Virginia Tree Stewards program and the Chesapeake Bay Landscape Professionals CREWS program.	All partners
Investigate potential to replicate Maryland and Pennsylvania's Conservation Corps programs to attract trained workers.	Lead TBD