

COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
VIRGINIA SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION BOARD

June 26, 2024

The Honorable David W. Marsden
Senate of Virginia
Post Office Box 10889
Burke, Virginia 22009

The Honorable David L. Bulova
Virginia House of Delegates
Post Office Box 106
Fairfax Station, Virginia 22039

Dear Senator Marsden and Delegate Bulova:

On behalf of Virginia's Soil and Water Conservation Board, thank you for your tremendous support of Virginia farmers and natural resources through the historic funding for agricultural best management practices. Fully meeting Virginia's needs assessment for the agricultural sector has resulted in increases in farmer recruitment and participation and the largest agricultural sector year-to-year nutrient reductions in the history of Virginia's Chesapeake Bay restoration efforts.

Virginia bases our needs assessment on the cost of implementing practices we committed to in our Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP). This approach ensures that our financial investments keep pace with Virginia's commitments. While Virginia's investments in implementing and installing agricultural practices has grown significantly, funding levels for the Department of Conservation and Recreation (Department) team that supports Virginia's Soil and Water Conservation District staff and farmers on everything from financial management and data analysis, to support and training for agronomic and structural practice implementation have not kept pace. The team is now deploying more resources than at any point in their history, while pay compression and uncompetitive salaries strain the Department's ability to retain key staff.

The Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board is concerned that without new investment into the Department's team, the agency will face more staff loss and be unable to keep pace with the growing demands for their services. We recognize that budgets are tight. The General Assembly investments are working, and all of Virginia is benefitting from cleaner water, healthier lands and a more sustainable agricultural sector of our economy. We ask that you consider providing the additional support the Department needs to continue to provide the best in-class services to Virginia.

The Board has identified several key needs for the agency that will help them keep pace with the work of deploying historic funding, market pressures on staffing, and evolving technologies.

These needs include:

- \$400,000 in additional base funding to retain existing staff
 - o *The Department is no longer a competitive employer. As a result, staff are often trained and then leave for more competitive positions at the federal level or in the private sector.*
 - o *This funding would allow the agency to address pay compression and adjust salaries to market-competitive levels.*
- \$420,000 for four (4) additional Conservation District Coordinators to provide closer oversight of districts
 - o *This would provide funding for salaries and benefits as well as information technology needs, vehicle, travel, and training.*
- \$250,000 for two (2) data services staff to assist with data science and analytics
 - o *This would provide funding for salaries and benefits as well as information technology needs, training and travel.*
- \$135,000 for a Regional Manager
 - o *This would provide funding for salary and benefits as well as information technology needs, vehicle, travel, and training.*
- \$105,000 for a Program Assistant
 - o *This would provide funding for salary and benefits as well as information technology needs, training, and travel.*

We would be happy to meet with you both to address any questions or concerns you may have. Thank you again for your support of the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost Share (VACS) Program, Virginia's soil and water resources, and the farmers around the state that benefit from this program.

Sincerely,



Charles Newton, Chair
Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board

cc: The Honorable Alfonso H. Lopez