Virginia General Assembly Session Concludes

Throughout the 2024 Virginia legislative session, lawmakers showed historic support for critical environmental issues, including bills that conserve trees, ban toxic products, and strengthen climate resiliency.

Virginia continues to lose tree canopy at an alarming rate due to development, road expansions, energy infrastructure, and other causes. To stem the loss, CBF supported several successful legislative initiatives, including House Bill 529 (Hope, D-1), which provides all localities with the authority to establish tree replacement requirements. Currently, localities have limited authority to require developers to replace a higher percentage of trees that are cleared for construction. House Bill 1100 (Carr, D-78) enables statewide adoption of tree conservation language, which is currently limited to the Northern Virginia region. House Bill 459 (Sullivan, D-6) and Senate Bill 121 (Subramanynam, D-32) provide incentives to preserve mature trees and add flexibility for tree funds. House Bill 309 (Hope, D-1) and Senate Bill 461 (Marsden, D-35), dubbed the Forest Conservation Act, will charge the state with creating a baseline canopy assessment. All of these bills passed out of the House and Senate and now are at the governor’s desk for consideration.

CBF urged the General Assembly to support House Bill 985 (Tran, D-18), which prohibits the sale and use of toxic pavement sealants in Virginia as a cost-effective way to prevent toxic pollution from entering our waterways and harming our children and wildlife. This type of sealant typically contains about 1,000 times more polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) than sealant products with an asphalt base. PAHs are known to cause cancer, birth defects, and mutations to aquatic life. For the first time since being introduced three years ago, this bill successfully passed both chambers and now awaits the governor’s signature to become state law.

We strongly supported budget amendments that direct Virginia to rejoin the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), a market-based program to cap and reduce carbon emissions from power generators. Virginia was a member until recently. Proceeds from RGGI participation support the Community Flood Preparedness Fund, which provides grants to localities across the state—from Winchester to Hampton, Danville to Fairfax—to build desperately needed resilience against coastal and inland flooding. This language was included in the final conference report of budget amendments approved by both chambers and awaits the governor’s action.

CBF also encouraged legislators to unify state agencies’ climate change resources by supporting House Bill 1458 (Hernandez, D-94). We’re pleased that this critical legislation was approved by the Senate and House and now awaits the governor’s signature. Once signed into law, this legislation will create the Office of Commonwealth Resilience, increase transparency and oversight over the distribution of resilience funds, and ensure local and state officials can maximize federal, state, and private flood mitigation funding opportunities.

Earlier this year, CBF filed a legal brief supporting a request to suspend Virginia’s withdrawal from RGGI. The brief emphasizes the importance of RGGI in providing consistent and dedicated funding to community flood prevention projects that prioritize nature-based resiliency solutions across Virginia. These projects reduce the impacts of sea level rise and flooding as well as improve water quality.

Virginia joined RGGI in 2020 through legislation passed in the General Assembly; however, last year, Governor Youngkin repealed the regulations that govern Virginia’s participation in RGGI, leading to a lawsuit challenging the withdrawal, filed by the Southern Environmental Law Center.

RGGI sets a regional limit on carbon dioxide emissions from power plants. Each plant must pay for each ton of carbon dioxide it emits. The emissions cap lowers over time, leading to cleaner air and less pollution to waterways.

As mentioned in the story to the left, legislators also support Virginia rejoining RGGI, as in just two years, the initiative raised more than $600 million, allowing Virginia to award $97.7 million for community flood prevention projects.
Creating Buffers in the Upper James River Watershed

In March, CBF, Boxerwood Education Association (a non-profit nature and environmental education center serving the children and families in Rockbridge County), and 75 students and their teachers, planted 103 native trees in Rockbridge County to create a riparian forested buffer.

The buffer is made possible due to a grant CBF received from the Virginia Environmental Endowment’s James River Water Quality Improvement Program to restore 200 acres of streamside forests in the Upper James River watershed. The program will cover all costs for landowners and farmers to plant and maintain riparian forested buffers.

Improving water quality is often cited as the primary reason for installing buffers, along with enhancing fish and wildlife habitat, but they also have enormous potential for carbon sequestration. We are proud to have partnered with Boxerwood on this planting.

Stronger Permit Needed in Hopewell

In late February, CBF joined the Southern Environmental Law Center, Hopewell-Colonial Heights NAACP, Sierra Club’s Falls of the James Group, and Virginia Interfaith Power & Light, to submit comments to the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality urging the agency to require AdvanSix Resins and Chemicals LLC to strengthen its draft permit. AdvanSix has applied to renew the air pollution permit for its chemical manufacturing plant in Hopewell.

The proposed reissuance is not strict enough to ensure compliance with Chesapeake Bay water-quality goals. Regulatory filings indicate that the plant has been flagged 66 times in the past eight years for violations of the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act, releasing toxic chemicals into Hopewell’s air, as well as into the James River. The City of Hopewell and the Chesapeake Bay watershed cannot afford another permit cycle of obliging permit terms.

Alliance Celebrates Six Billion Oyster Milestone

The Chesapeake Oyster Alliance (COA) recently announced it has recorded a new total of six billion oysters directly added to the Bay since 2017. COA’s count aims to include all oysters directly added to the Bay and its tributaries through restoration and aquaculture. These efforts have now surpassed the halfway mark to the group’s goal to promote adding 10 billion oysters to the Bay by 2025.

Virginia saw an outstanding year for oyster aquaculture with about 119 million oysters recorded in the Commonwealth in 2023. Oyster aquaculture operations raise these oysters to sell to restaurants and consumers, supporting local economies while filtering water and creating habitat. CBF founded COA in 2018 to bring back oysters from historically low levels. It has grown to include more than 110 nonprofits, academic institutions, businesses, and aquaculture operations.

CBF in the Community

Tree Maintenance
Yaupon Place
Wednesday, April 10
4:30 p.m.–6:30 p.m.
131 Westwood Avenue, Richmond
Help CBF add TreeDiapers® to trees planted last fall. TreeDiapers® absorb rain or irrigation water and slowly release it back to the plant when the soil dries. Visit events.cbf.org/yaupon-place-2024 to register.

Outdoor Lunch & Learn
Saturday, April 13
11:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.
Science Museum of Virginia
2500 West Broad Street, Richmond
Help CBF staff a table at this community event. Visit signupgenius.com/go/10C084FA4A62CABFDC25-48347985-earth/# to sign up for a shift.

Belemeade Outdoor Classroom
1800 Krouse Street, Richmond
Join CBF and Southside ReLeaf to enjoy lunch and learn about city environmental resources, the benefits of trees, and your Southside neighbors. Email Autumn Hart at ahart@cbf.org for more information.

Student Leadership Summer Expeditions
These multi-day, in-person, overnight experiences are open to rising 9th-12th graders. Expeditions primarily take place outdoors where participants explore different parts of the watershed. Courses scheduled for July and August. Register by April 19 at cbf.org/studentleadership.

Middle School Bay Eco-Camp
Rising 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students are invited to join CBF this summer on our new weeklong learning adventure designed for students interested in the outdoors and the Bay’s natural ecosystems. For details and to register, please visit cbf.org/ecoecamp.

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