



Coastal Virginia Community Rating System (CRS) Workgroup Increased Geographic Impact & Virtual Capacity

Background: CRS User Groups

The [Coastal Virginia CRS Workgroup](#) (“the Workgroup”) is a community of practice for flood risk professionals that meets bi-monthly in person in the City of Newport News and online through the Zoom platform. The Workgroup constitutes a “CRS User Group.” CRS User Groups are found in many states and provide a forum for floodplain professionals to meet regularly about the National Flood Insurance Program's (NFIP) voluntary program, the Community Rating System (CRS), and other floodplain management issues. Meetings often include informational presentations and group discussions to transfer knowledge and troubleshoot difficult flood risk issues. Communities that do not participate in the CRS program often attend these meetings to ask questions and learn from the discussions and presentations as they contemplate joining the program. Established in 2010, the Coastal Virginia CRS Workgroup includes locality representatives from a wide range of coastal communities in the Commonwealth. The Workgroup welcomes participation from private and academic sectors interested in learning about the NFIP, CRS, hazard mitigation, and floodplain management.

History: Coastal Virginia CRS Workgroup

Established in 2010 under its original name, the “Hampton Roads Regional CRS Workgroup,” this group of professionals was initially comprised of only local government staff. Over the course of a few years, group membership expanded to include state agency staff (Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation), a nonprofit organization (Wetlands Watch), and an academic institution (Virginia Coastal Policy Center at William & Mary Law School). Beginning in 2012, the Workgroup grew considerably, as interest in the CRS Program spread across local governments due to the Biggert-Waters and Grimm-Waters/HFIAA Congressional reforms that imposed mandatory premium increases for flood insurance policyholders. These premium increases influenced local governments’ interest in joining the CRS and excelling in the program. Over the past nine years, the CRS Workgroup membership has developed to include new local governments, state agencies, regional planning district commission staff, private consultants, flood mitigation professionals, other academic institutions, and new nonprofit organizations. Much of this expanded interest is attributed to rising flood insurance premiums, although the impacts of climate change, sea level rise, and increased precipitation, and governments’ call for “resilience” as a response, elevated the CRS Program as a resilience building tool across the Commonwealth.

Growing Membership & Technology Need

While the Workgroup’s member demographic diversified, its geographic distribution similarly changed. Local governments as far east as Accomack County on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, as far

west as the City of Franklin, and as far north as the City of Richmond began attending the Workgroup meetings. In 2015, the Workgroup changed its name from the Hampton Roads Regional CRS Workgroup to the Coastal VA CRS Workgroup to reflect this expansion of geographic membership. As the 2010s came to a close, Wetlands Watch began offering video conferencing during the Workgroup meetings. The internet connection in the Newport News municipal meeting space varied in strength, causing sporadic loss of connection, and a lack of microphones limited interactive participation, but members steadily elected to participate through this electronic option.

In 2019, Wetlands Watch conducted twelve Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program funded CRS Workshops/Trainings for local governments across coastal Virginia. Many workshops occurred in small, rural, and resource constrained communities, where travel to attend the CRS Workgroup meetings in person was either too great a distance or too great a staff time investment. Offering an option for these local government staff to participate electronically from their own communities proved essential to grow interest and participation in the CRS Program. In addition to an emergent number of coastal communities participating in the Workgroup, many members started joining from elsewhere. The dissolution of two regional floodplain/CRS User Groups in northern and western Virginia contributed to the participation of local governments and stakeholders from outside the “coastal” zone.

This new geographic interest indicated a critical need for a more stable and inclusive online participation option for members. Wetlands Watch received a grant from the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program to purchase audio and visual equipment that would allow in person and virtual attendees to hear questions and answers posed by both parties and see members discussing issues through video cameras. The goal of this new equipment was to create a truly interactive meeting environment, which would improve the CRS Workgroup’s effectiveness in reaching rural and resource constrained communities, as well as those interested in plugging into a floodplain management network from the western and northern regions of Virginia.

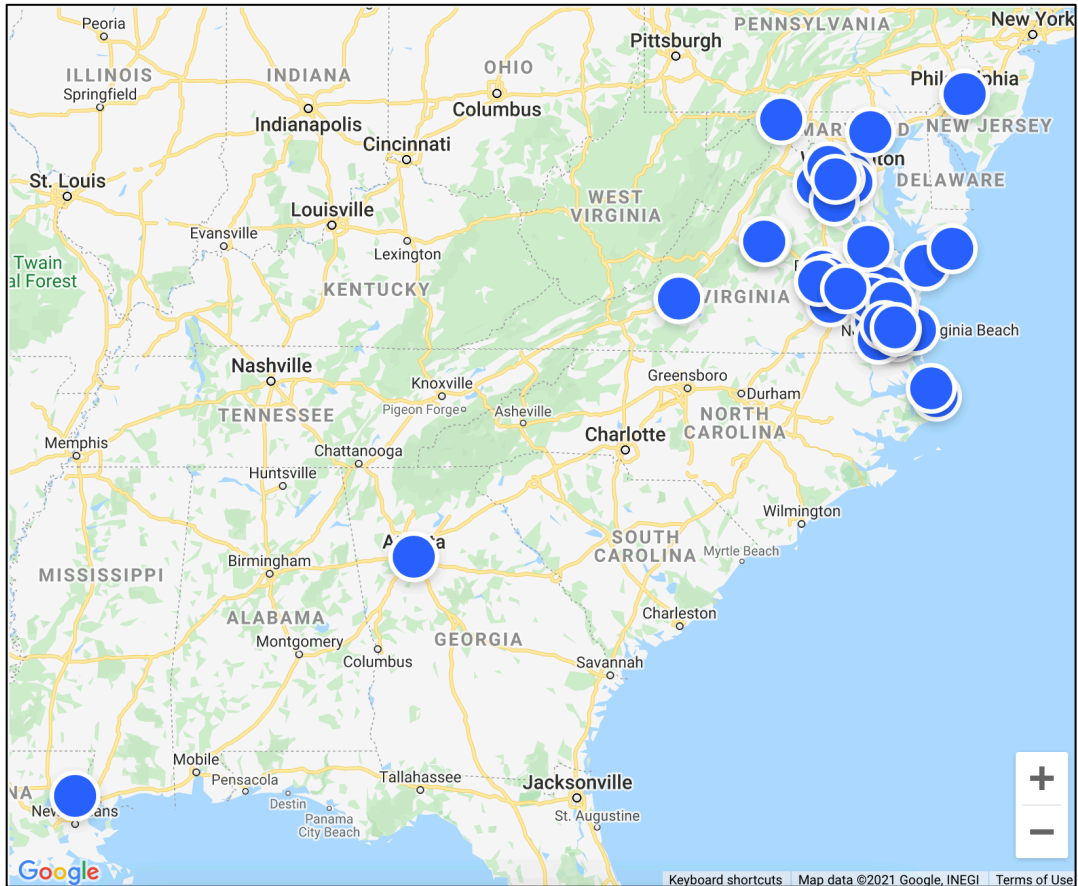
Implementation of Improved Technology

When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down all in person meetings, the Coastal VA CRS Workgroup migrated into the online meeting space with ease, given Wetlands Watch’s previous use of Zoom and some Workgroup members’ familiarity with participating in a Workgroup meeting on the Zoom platform. The first exclusively online meeting occurred in March of 2020 and since that date, the Workgroup hosted eight online-only meetings. All meetings were recorded and posted on the CRS Workgroup website for public access.

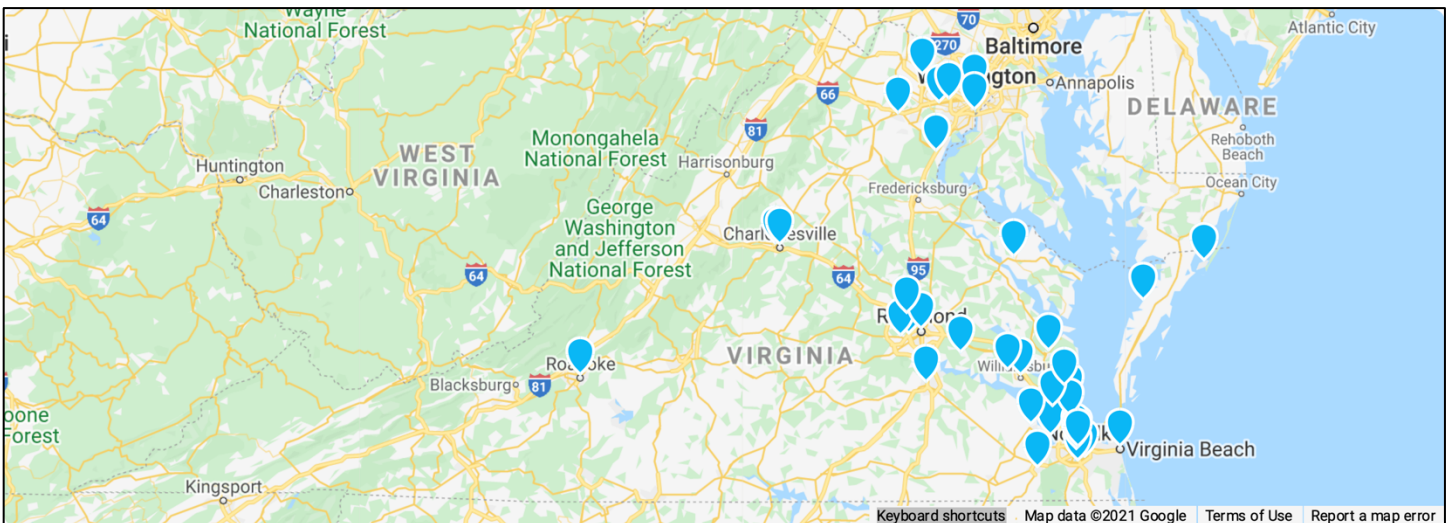
Wetlands Watch purchased the audio and visual equipment referenced above and conducted the first hybrid (in person and virtual option) meeting on July 28, 2021. During the July 2021 meeting, twelve members participated in person and twenty-five members participated online. Wetlands Watch staff participated both in person and online, to test the efficacy of the new technological equipment and reported back on the meeting experience from both perspectives. The staff feedback mirrored that of Workgroup members: the new audio and visual equipment helped create a more inclusive and interactive meeting environment for attendees, both in person and online. Workgroup meeting facilitation operated more smoothly, with reduced delays in repeating comments or questions missed due to lack of audio in the meeting room.

The Workgroup will resume hybrid meetings in November 2021, utilizing the new equipment at each meeting to reach those interested local government staff and other professional stakeholders with capacity or geographic limitations that would otherwise prohibit participation.

Coastal VA Workgroup Participants (National Scale) October 1, 2020 – September 30, 2021



Coastal VA Workgroup Participants (Regional Scale) October 1, 2020 – September 30, 2021



Coastal VA Workgroup Participants (State Scale) October 1, 2020 – September 30, 2021



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