



**COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA**  
*Office of the Governor*

Ralph S. Northam  
Governor

**JOINT LETTER OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE SECRETARIES OF NATURAL RESOURCES, AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY, EDUCATION AND THE VIRGINIA ASSOCIATION OF SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICTS**

**I. The Issue**

Virginia's final Chesapeake Bay Phase III Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP) submitted to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on August 23, 2019 includes the following commitment number 14:

**Enhance Coordination among State Agencies assisting farmers**

Multiple state and local agencies provide technical assistance to farmers employing management practices to improve farm operations and reduce runoff of excess nutrients and sediment. These state agencies include the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE), the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), the Department of Forestry (VDOP), the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS). Farmers also receive assistance from their local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). These agencies work collaboratively, but also recognize the opportunity to enhance that collaboration. Through a joint letter of agreement between the Secretaries of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Forestry, and Education and the Virginia Association of SWCDs (VASWCD), Virginia will identify and implement avenues for cross-collaboration that address technical assistance, education and training, research needs, and agriculture incentives. Agency capacity needs will also be identified.

**II. Actions and Commitments**

This letter is the fulfillment of the obligation made in the WIP and has been developed with the cooperation and input of DCR, VDOP, VDACS, VCE, DEQ, and VASWCD. Each of the actions described below will advance the goals of the WIP and the ability of agricultural producers to achieve production needs with assistance through better coordination and delivery of agricultural programs.

In addition to the actions contained in this letter, we will work to strengthen the coordination with federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Service Agency. Agency ability to address WIP



**COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA**  
*Office of the Governor*

Ralph S. Northam  
Governor

goals is influenced by the need for additional capacity through creating new and filling vacant positions. As such, we recognize the ongoing need for additional agency support.

We therefore agree to pursue the following actions with timelines and benchmarks to be established in a work plan to be presented to the signatories of this letter by May 15, 2021. A steering committee of agency and partner (DCR, VDOF, VDACS, VCE, DEQ, and VASWCD) staff will meet no less than two times each calendar year to assess progress and propose modifications to the signatories.

**III. Cross-Collaboration Implementation Actions**

**Action 1: Training and Programs**

**Action 1:** Continue and expand cross training of SWCD staff as described below by state environmental agencies through the DCR Conservation Planning Certification curriculum including updates and information on WIP implementation.

**Action 1(a):** Ensure agencies send staff to annual DCR Virginia Agricultural Cost Share (VACS) Program training and VASWCD Annual Meeting. These agencies include VDOF, VDACS, VCE, and DEQ.

**Action 1(b):** Cross train SWCD staff with other agency agricultural and silvicultural water quality programs offered by DCR, VDOF, VCE and DEQ so that field efforts are enhanced. Cross training could include all attending or presenting at DCR VACS annual training, VASWCD Annual Meeting, annual SWCD Employees training, as well as training offered by VDOF regarding forestry practices, VDACS training for the Agricultural Stewardship Program, and training available from NRCS and other federal partners. Enhanced collaboration will help ensure the right people are present for outreach events and farm demonstrations.

**Action 1(c):** Promote interaction and awareness through required attendance at local Soil and Water Conservation District meetings by relevant agency staff, including DCR, VDOF, VDACS, and VCE.

Implementing Agencies: VASWCD, DCR, VDOF, DEQ, and VCE

**Action 2: Employee Responsibilities**



**COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA**  
*Office of the Governor*

Ralph S. Northam  
Governor

**Action 2:** Adjust relevant agency staff Employee Work Profiles (EWP) and position descriptions to include responsibilities related to cross-agency training, coordination, and farmer and landowner outreach.

**Action 2(a):** Include cross-training responsibilities in grant awards or contracts with SWCD and VASWCD.

Implementing Agencies: DCR, VDACS, VCE, DEQ, VDOF

**Action 3: Agency Training and Workshop**

**Action 3:** Establish cross training among state agencies who interact directly with farmers and landowners to better prepare all staff, regardless of agency, to make referrals in the field to programs housed within another agency. Hold an annual inter-agency workshop for each agency to present on their agricultural related programs, which may occur through an existing event. Ensure state agencies are well versed in programs offered by local SWCDs.

Implementing Agencies: DCR, VDACS, VCE, DEQ, VDOF

**Action 4: Conservation Cabinet**

**Action 4:** The Secretary of Natural Resources should continue to host meetings with the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry, Secretary of Education, DCR, VDACS, VCE, DEQ, VDOF through the Conservation Cabinet, or if the Conservation Cabinet ceases to exist, then shall host meetings as often as deemed necessary with relevant agency heads to ensure senior management awareness and involvement in assisting farmers and achieving our WIP goals.

Implementing Entity: Office of the Secretary of Natural Resources

**Action 5: VCE Programs**

**Action 5:** Virginia Cooperative Extension will incorporate information regarding state and federal agency agriculture and forestry conservation programs and training opportunities, including new employee training programs with a focus on equipping VCE agents to be able to inform farmers of where they can get help for specific environmental or other challenges they observe on farms they visit.

Implementing Agency: VCE



**COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA**  
*Office of the Governor*

Ralph S. Northam  
Governor

**Action 6: Cost-Share Program Feedback**

**Action 6:** Continue to utilize work groups already in place to facilitate appropriate conversations regarding increased collaboration, cost-share and program delivery including the Chesapeake Bay WIP Interagency Team. Based on this ongoing discussion, solicit views of the members of the Chesapeake Bay Stakeholder Advisory Group to bring together a feedback loop about successes, failures and adaptations needed. Add VCE to the Chesapeake Bay WIP Interagency Team.

Implementing Entity: Office of the Secretary of Natural Resources

**Action 7: Enhanced Outreach**

**Action 7:** Conduct an interagency review of outreach materials to ensure consistency between agencies and creation of new materials to help landowners compare and contrast various programs. Ensure materials highlight the benefits to farmers implementing VACS program best management practices. Build a “one stop shop” on the web that links to all relevant state and federal programs and is connected to training opportunities.

Implementing Agencies: DCR and VDOF with cooperation from VASWCD, VCE, VDACS, and DEQ

**Action 8: Update DEQ Information**

**Action 8:** Update the information included on the "Our Rivers, Our Bay: Virginia's Path to Clean Water" webpage housed currently on DEQ's website and notify relevant agencies and SWCDs. Currently, DCR, VDOF and VDACS have a link to the DEQ page. Offer links and associated logos and artwork to VCE and the VASWCD for inclusion on their websites.

Implementing Agency: DEQ

**Action 9: VCE Capacity**

**Action 9:** Work to increase the capacity of VCE. Currently, VCE has numerous Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Agent vacancies in localities that are within the Chesapeake Bay watershed including Fluvanna, Spotsylvania, Nelson, Amherst, King George, Amelia, King William / King and Queen, Charles City, James City, Suffolk, Sussex, Surry, and Richmond



**COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA**  
*Office of the Governor*

Ralph S. Northam  
Governor

County. Identify the regions that VCE is unable to reach, and work to ensure VCE has the capacity to fill these vacancies and others that might occur, thus providing support in those regions.

Implementing Entities: VCE and Office of the Secretary of Education

**Action 10: Underserved Farming and Forestry Communities**

**Action 10:** Evaluate the reach of the Cost Share Program and other support for farmers and forest landowners to determine underserved farming communities. Develop methods to reach underserved communities that may benefit from the information and assistance agencies provide. Work with VDACS, DCR, VCE, VDOF, VASWCD, and the Council on Environmental Justice and the Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer.

Implementing Entities: DCR and Offices of the Secretaries of Natural Resources and Agriculture and Forestry

**Action 11: Agricultural Assessments**

**Action 11:** Explore how agricultural assessments developed under the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act can be better incorporated into broader conservation plans developed under the auspices of DCR. Develop a plan to ensure collaboration and update the plan annually.

Implementing Agencies: DEQ and DCR

**Action 12: Recognition and Reporting**

**Action 12(a):** Establish a recognition program for agency, VCE, and SWCD staff that show excellence or innovation to promoting the goal contained in commitment 14 of the WIP.

**Action 12(b):** Provide annual reports on the implementation of these actions to the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board, the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the Virginia Association of Conservation District Employees, Secretary of Natural Resources, Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry, the Secretary of Education, Conservation Cabinet, and other entities.

Implementing Agency: DCR in collaboration with partner agencies



**COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA**  
*Office of the Governor*

Ralph S. Northam  
Governor

**IV. Conclusion**

In addition to the action items contained in this letter, we will continue to promote, refine and recognize cooperation and collaboration and strengthen partnerships with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Farm Service Agency and other federal agencies. We will continue to cooperate and coordinate with private sector organizations and associations, to undertake this work that will support farmers and landowners and help us meet our Chesapeake Bay pollution reduction goals.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date: 11/9/20  
Secretary of Natural Resource

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date: 11/9/20  
Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date: 11/12/20  
Secretary of Education

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date: 11/16/20  
President, Virginia Association of Soil and Water  
Conservation Districts