

Why Are Wetlands Important?

Located where land meets water, wetlands—marshes, swamps, and bogs—are low-lying areas covered by natural, non-flood water some or all of the year. The Chesapeake Bay watershed includes 1.5 million acres of wetlands.

Wetlands are among the most productive, diverse, and important ecosystems in Virginia. Both tidal and nontidal wetlands improve water quality, reduce storm damage and flooding, control erosion, provide vital wildlife habitat, and help fight climate change.

Wetlands act as natural filters, protecting groundwater and downstream waters by trapping and treating pollutants, including phosphorus, nitrogen, and sediment. They also act as a sponge and absorb water after storm events. This absorbed water is slowly released to percolate and recharge groundwater aquifers.

Wetlands help protect low-lying communities by absorbing excess flood waters, reducing erosion, and minimizing property damage during major storms. Filling wetlands can exacerbate the chronic flooding that disproportionately hurts disadvantaged communities, which are more likely to be located on what was once considered marginal land.

The wide variety of plants, bushes, and trees that grow in wetlands bind the soil, preventing extensive erosion and controlling sediment. In addition, the shoots of wetland vegetation slow down the flow of water, allowing fine sediment particles to settle.

Wetlands provide some of the most productive habitat for wildlife. Their vegetation provides food, shelter, spawning, and nursery areas for fish and shellfish; wintering grounds for migrating waterfowl; and shelter and food for amphibians, reptiles, mammals, and birds. In the U.S., it is estimated that 90 percent of all recreational fish and shellfish harvested and 75 percent of those commercially harvested depend on wetlands for food or habitat.

Wetlands can store 50 times more carbon than rain forests, helping keep this climate-change contributing gas out of the atmosphere. And the flooding and erosion control functions of wetlands can aid in reducing the impacts of climate change.

Unfortunately, a number of factors caused by climate change are expected to impact wetlands. Changes in precipitation and temperature could alter their usefulness. In areas where development prevents tidal wetlands from shifting inland with sea level rise, they may disappear. Freshwater wetlands can also be affected by encroaching saltwater.

And wetlands are already disappearing quickly. Virginia has lost to development approximately half of the wetlands that existed in the 1780s, and, according to Virginia's Coastal Resilience Master Plan, by 2080, roughly 171,000 acres of today's tidal wetlands are projected to become open water, a loss of 89%.



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION
Saving a National Treasure

JANUARY 2025



Support HB 2034: Create a Policy Task Force to Protect Wetlands

The Supreme Court's 2023 decision in *Sackett v. EPA* removes federal protections from vast swaths of the nation's wetlands—typically isolated wetlands that are not adjacent or connected on the surface to other waters.

Because of the *Sackett* decision, Virginia's existing state tidal and nontidal wetlands laws and regulations are more important than ever. It now falls to our state and local decision-makers to enforce existing wetlands laws to protect the wetlands that support Virginia's communities, local economies, and cherished resources such as the Chesapeake Bay.

Fortunately, Virginia has the benefit of longstanding state laws to protect its state waters, which the General Assembly has defined broadly to include "all water, on the surface and under the ground" within its borders, "including wetlands." This definition includes both tidal and nontidal wetlands.

However, the Commonwealth lacks a comprehensive strategy to protect tidal and nontidal wetlands from impacts due to human activities and climate change—as well as to restore or create additional wetlands to achieve our Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) Watershed Implementation Plan goals. These goals commit Virginia to restore more than 3,500 acres of tidal and nontidal wetlands.

Therefore, **CBF urges legislators to support HB 2034 (Simonds), which directs the Secretary of Natural and Historic Resources to establish an interagency policy task force to develop strategies for protecting the existing tidal and nontidal wetlands of the Commonwealth, and develop plans for wetland restoration, creation, and migration to address adverse impacts from human activities and climate change.**

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