

September 28, 2026

The Honorable Abigail Spanberger
Governor of Virginia
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 1475
Richmond, VA 23218

Dear Governor Spanberger,

We, the undersigned organizations, urge you to support the Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) by enacting common sense solutions to address critical funding gaps and ensure the agency has the resources necessary to continue protecting and providing quality wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation opportunities for all residents of the Commonwealth.

The Department of Wildlife Resources leads the conservation and management of all terrestrial and aquatic wildlife in Virginia— including birds, fish, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, freshwater mussels, other aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates—to ensure healthy habitats for the benefit of current and future generations. Beyond ecosystem management, DWR is also responsible for protecting people and property by enforcing hunting, trapping, fishing, and boating laws for both resource protection and public safety and managing increasingly frequent human-wildlife conflicts.

Despite this broad mandate, DWR operates entirely from non-general funds, with 37% of its budget derived from license and permit sales and permits, 27% from transfers of a dedicated portion of sales tax revenues collected on outdoor equipment and watercraft, and 26% from federal grants. In recent years, DWR has faced mounting budget pressures driven by a prolonged period of flat revenues and rising costs driven by inflation, growing responsibilities that are not federally grant-eligible, and increasing operating expenses stemming from higher technology and staffing costs driven by state employee salary increases in multiple successive state budgets. These pressures have forced the agency to reduce levels of staffing and programming outside of core mission areas, and reduce services available to all Virginians.

Virginia's outdoor recreation economy is strong. Our lands, waters, and wildlife help generate \$14.4 billion annually and support more than 126,000 jobs, and it is poised to grow. Hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, and recreational boating - all activities supported directly by DWR - support a significant portion of that economic impact. Communities across the Commonwealth are eager to invest in better access to the outdoors as a strategy to attract tourists, draw new businesses, and make Virginia a better place to live, work, and raise a family. Investing in the protection, stewardship, and accessibility of Virginia's outdoors is a broadly shared, bipartisan investment that delivers returns for nature and our communities alike. As such, we encourage you to support the following initiatives:

Increase the cap of HB 38 sales tax revenue from \$13 million to \$19 million and ensure the full transfer of funds. DWR receives a portion of the sales and use tax collected on hunting, fishing, and wildlife-watching equipment sold in the Commonwealth, up to a legislatively authorized cap of \$13 million. This cap has not been adjusted since it was first established in 1998, despite a clear statutory

requirement that the cap be adjusted every five years in accordance with the national US Fish and Wildlife Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation. Estimated hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching expenditures have steadily increased and 2% of such expenditures has exceeded the original \$13 million cap since 2011. In the most recent survey, Virginians reported \$2,433,625,095 in sales, with 2% equaling \$48,672,502.

In addition to the unadjusted cap, revenues are regularly diverted away from DWR and the agency has received the full \$13 million transfer only **twice in the past 16 years**. The combination of a static, outdated cap and ongoing revenue diversions away from DWR makes it exceedingly difficult for DWR to fully fund its law enforcement efforts. We urge you to support DWR's request to increase the cap to \$19 million, which reflects the average amount Virginians have spent on hunting, fishing, and wildlife-watching equipment over the past 6 survey periods (1998-2022).

Mandate the full and automatic transfer of 100% of Watercraft Sales and Use Tax revenue to DWR.

This revenue is generated from a two-percent tax on the sale price of each watercraft sold in the Commonwealth. By statute, these funds are designated to support boating-related activities, including the acquisition and maintenance of boating access facilities, boating safety law enforcement, educational programs, and other related costs—all of which face growing demand each year from recreational paddlers. Despite code requirements and Appropriations Act language, DWR often receives varying levels of these transfer funds from year to year and almost never receives 100 percent of the overall total tax collected.

Provide \$400,000 in General Fund support to unlock federal funding associated with license-exempt hunters and anglers. Virginia's broad license exemptions mean an estimated 260,553 hunters and 542,973 anglers do not purchase licenses, limiting DWR's ability to draw down federal matching funds. DWR estimates that a \$400,000 General Fund investment could help recover up to \$5.3 million annually in federal funds generated in part through excise taxes already paid by Virginia sportsmen and women. We urge you to include DWR's \$400,000 request in the budget to help capture these federal dollars and strengthen the agency's ability to conserve wildlife and support outdoor recreation.

We ask you to support and prioritize these commonsense solutions to address the financial challenges currently faced by the Department of Wildlife Resources that do not raise taxes or fees for Virginians. The agency performs a vital role conserving Virginia's wildlife and providing continued access to outdoor recreation for all Virginians, but it cannot continue doing so if it continues to be squeezed by rising costs and expanding mission responsibilities resulting from General Assembly actions.

This letter is sent on behalf of the undersigned organizations, who collectively advocate for robust natural resources funding. Please contact Mikaela Ruiz-Ramón (m.ruiz-ramon@tnc.org) with any questions about this letter.

Sincerely,

CC:

The Honorable Mark Sickles, Secretary of Finance

The Honorable David Bulova, Secretary of Natural and Historic Resources

American Rivers
American Sportfishing Association
Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
Blue Ridge PRISM
Blue Ridge Land Conservancy
Boone and Crockett Club
Central Virginia Land Conservancy
Chesapeake Conservancy
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation
Delta Waterfowl Foundation
Ducks Unlimited
Environmental Defense Fund
Friends of the Lower Appomattox River
Friends of the Rappahannock
James River Association
National Bobwhite and Grassland Initiative
National Deer Association
New River Conservancy
New River Land Trust
Pheasants Forever
Potomac Conservancy

Quail Forever
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
Shenandoah National Park Trust
Southern Virginia Land Conservancies
The Clinch Coalition
The Conservation Fund
The Nature Conservancy
The Wildlife Society, Southeastern Section
The Wildlife Society, Virginia Chapter
Trust for Public Land
Virginia Conservation Network
Virginia Council of Trout Unlimited
Virginia Eastern Shore Land Trust
Virginia Hunters Who Care, Inc.
Virginia Native Plant Society
Virginia Osprey Foundation
Virginia's United Land Trusts
Wetlands Watch
Wild Virginia
Wildlands Network
Wildlife Foundation of Virginia