

April 10, 2020



Dear *Member of Congress*,

As co-chairs of the Choose Clean Water Coalition, and on behalf of our more than 250 member organizations, we thank you for the strong commitment from Congress to support the programs and projects that are essential to maintaining and restoring clean water to the Chesapeake Bay and its rivers and streams. We urge you to not allow the current global pandemic to cause a retreat from that commitment at this critical time. Access to clean water is critical to the health and well-being of Americans and we want to outline our priorities for consideration in future legislation intended to address this crisis. We also urge you to ensure that nothing in this legislation undermines or weakens current environmental laws and protections.

Two-thirds of the 18 million people in the Chesapeake Bay watershed obtain their drinking water from the rivers and streams that flow through the cities, towns, and farms throughout our six state, 64,000 square mile watershed. Protecting and restoring clean water is essential for human health and for a robust regional economy. It is also critical that all residents, regardless of income or other factors, have access to clean and affordable drinking water and sanitary, effective, and affordable waste water disposal.

We believe it is critical to address the water infrastructure needs of our region and the nation, while also providing financial support to low income communities and low-income ratepayers for water and wastewater/stormwater services. We also urge you to consider targeted funding for on-the-ground restoration work that is shovel-ready throughout the six states of the Chesapeake Bay watershed and the District of Columbia.

Clean Water State Revolving Fund:

We strongly recommend you substantially increase funding for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (SRF). We support the proposal to reauthorize and fund the Clean Water SRF at \$40 billion over the next five years. Despite the clean water needs of local communities increasing dramatically, the funding level for the Clean Water SRF has eroded over the years. The Clean Water SRF is a crucial funding component of the Clean Water Act and is meant to ensure that local governments have federal funding support for Act's mandates. And the Clean Water SRF is needed now more than ever. The Choose Clean Water Coalition supports efforts to enhance investments in key water infrastructure projects nationwide, and the Clean Water SRF is the single best mechanism to accomplish that goal. Investing in the Clean Water SRF will help close the gap between federal infrastructure investment in clean water and the known need, and will improve water quality and protect human health in our region and across the nation.

These low interest loans are critical for clean water and for ratepayers in the Chesapeake region and nationwide. We also strongly support targeting 20 percent of the Clean Water SRF funds for

green infrastructure and innovative projects including those to manage stormwater pollution. These stormwater projects help communities improve water quality while creating green space, mitigating flooding, and enhancing air quality. In addition, the federal government should accompany these funds with federal technical assistance to help states raise awareness of green infrastructure's benefits and build demand for green projects.

The Clean Water SRF allocates money to the states based on a set formula, which is then used for low interest loans to local governments for critical capital construction improvement projects. These projects include reducing nutrient and sediment pollution from wastewater treatment and stormwater facilities; nonpoint sources of pollution, such as farms and development; and other sources. In addition to the use of these funds on farms and for nonpoint source pollution, it also supports other pollution reduction and prevention activities in rural areas, such as reforestation, forest protection, and stream stabilization and restoration. The Clean Water SRF also enables local governments in the Chesapeake watershed to take actions to keep their rivers and streams clean. As the list of clean water infrastructure needs in the Chesapeake region continues to expand, we request that Congress increase funding for this critical infrastructure program.

Low Income Assistance for Drinking Water/Wastewater:

We urge you to address the health and financial emergency facing many people and communities in the Chesapeake Bay watershed and nationwide by establishing a new Low-Income Household Drinking Water and Wastewater Assistance Program. There are far too many Americans who do not have access to clean and affordable drinking water and sanitary, effective, and affordable wastewater disposal. During the current public health emergency, the establishment of such a program is critical to provide federal grants to assist low-income households and communities in paying their drinking water and wastewater utility bills. We need to ensure that Americans do not have their water service shut down, which would make this dire health emergency even worse.

There are numerous legislative vehicles currently before Congress intended to provide just this type of financial support to low-income communities and low-income ratepayers for water and wastewater/stormwater services. We urge you to consider existing legislation, or other means, to immediately address this public health issue in the Chesapeake Bay region and nationwide.

EPA Chesapeake Bay Program Project Funds:

We request that Congress add \$44 million for on-the-ground implementation of clean water remediation projects in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Two critical EPA grant programs, the Chesapeake Bay Small Watershed Grants and the Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Removal Grants, serve as the best vehicle to bring these projects to life. Over the past three years, these grant programs issued \$32 million in EPA funds for 166 on-the-ground projects and leveraged \$77 million in non-EPA matching funds for the work. But the demand has far exceeded the available funding, with \$44 million in requested EPA funding for worthy projects not available.

In FY20, Congress directed EPA to provide \$18 million to these two grant programs- \$9 million for each grant program. We strongly urge Congress to add an additional \$44 million in funding,

evenly split between these two grant programs, to meet the needs of unfunded but worthy projects submitted over the past three years. This will help to keep restoration efforts on track.

Over the past decade, the states and the federal government have cooperated jointly and committed to a massive restoration program in the Chesapeake Bay watershed to restore the Bay and its tributaries by 2025. Water quality is improving, and as we enter the final few years approaching the 2025 deadlines this is not the time to slow down this restoration effort. The coronavirus pandemic has effectively shut down many restoration activities at critical time – spring, when much conservation work gets done.

With the 2025 clean-up deadline approaching, it is imperative to continue the necessary on-the-ground work state and local governments and non-profit groups are tackling in all six Chesapeake Bay watershed states and the District of Columbia. Again, we request an additional \$44 million for the two EPA grant programs, which are currently administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). NFWF has ensured these grants support projects that help the states meet the goals set in their own Watershed Implementation Plans. In Pennsylvania alone, the state contributing the most pollution in the watershed, they are desperately seeking \$257 million annually just to implement their own Watershed Implementation Plan that will close most, but not all, of the pollution reduction gap. But it is not just Pennsylvania where financial support is needed.

These two grant programs provide an opportunity to fund shovel-ready projects by non-profit organizations, local and state governments, universities, and local individuals, such as farmers. This work can begin immediately on critical projects that protect and restore clean and safe water throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

In order to maximize the efficient delivery and efficacy of these resources for critical works, we urge Congress to allow EPA to waive cost-share requirements where appropriate for economic hardship.

- **Special Conowingo Project Fund (\$10 million)**

We also recommend an additional \$10 million be allocated to the Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Removal (INSR) Grants, currently administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, to focus on reducing the additional pollution coming from Conowingo Dam. Recent conditions at Conowingo Dam, which lies on the Susquehanna River in Maryland, has resulted in more pollution entering the Chesapeake Bay – including an estimated 6 million pounds of nitrogen every year. This adds considerable costs to the states on top of their existing obligations. There are efforts underway to leverage public and private investment opportunities to spur economic development through the implementation of “shovel ready” projects. A new Special Conowingo Project Fund as a subset of the INSR grants can jump start this effort to get additional work accomplished upstream of Conowingo Dam in Maryland, Pennsylvania and New York. This new Fund would be designed to promote new and innovative practices that are specifically tied to leveraging public and private capital and to get on-the-ground projects started and completed quickly.

Extend Farm Bill Conservation Program Expiration Deadlines

Farm Bill conservation programs are critical for meeting the clean water goals in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Our region's farmers are leaders in utilizing these programs and doing the right thing for water quality and public safety. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is stopping or severely delaying much of this work. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service offices, as well as County Conservation District offices are closed, and much of the technical assistance that these offices provide to farmers is not occurring.

Many of the Farm Bill's conservation programs have deadlines approaching this year and much of the federal money has to be spent by the end of the fiscal year on September 30, 2020. We urge Congress to ensure that there is flexibility on the ground to utilize these dollars as intended and not to expire prematurely before they are properly allocated and expended.

This is a time for our nation to come together and work for the greater good. We support your efforts to protect the nation's health and economy and respectfully submit our suggestions for what we believe will help make our region a safer, healthier, and more prosperous place.

Sincerely,



Lisa Alexander, Co-Chair
Audubon Naturalist Society



Jennifer Mihills, Co-Chair
National Wildlife Federation



Mary Rafferty, Co-Chair
Virginia Conservation Network