

December 15, 2014

Dear General Assembly Member:

The undersigned organizations are deeply concerned about the inadequacy of resources for the Division of Natural Heritage (DNH) within the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and urge you to support an amendment to increase the budget for DNH.

The Division of Natural Heritage is the primary agency within the Natural Resources Secretariat dedicated to identifying and protecting Virginia's spectacular biodiversity. Much of that is done through the establishment of a network of natural area preserves, many of which are open to the public. In fact, visiting natural areas is the fourth most popular outdoor activity in Virginia.

In 2002, the DNH had 48 full-time staff positions and managed 34 Natural Area Preserves. Today, 40 full-time staff manages 61 Natural Area Preserves -- an additional 35,538 acres. This increased acreage includes a total of 8,455 mapped natural community and rare species locations that must be monitored. At the same time, the state population has grown by 1 million increasing demand for all DNH program services. Adding to this deficit burden, in August, DNH took a \$220,000 budget cut to assist with Department-wide administration costs.

This extreme mismatch between the Division of Natural Heritage's needs and its available budget represents a crisis for continued protection of Virginia's natural heritage both now and for future generations. Because of the budget shortfall, North Landing River Natural Area has been closed due to inability to protect it from trash dumping and illegal drug use, eight Natural Areas in the Chesapeake Bay region are without a Natural Area Steward due to lack of funds to fill a critical vacancy, opening new public access areas has been stopped, rare species monitoring has been deferred along with invasive species control and prescribed burning. Ongoing projects such as habitat restoration of longleaf pine savannas, warm season grasslands and habitat for migratory bird populations is now threatened as is cave monitoring for septic tank leaks, hydrologic changes and rare species identification and landowner assistance with cave and sinkhole issues. These are just a few examples of a broad array of compromised, or terminated, activities caused by inadequate resources.

A re-benchmark of the resources needed to adequately meet DNH's needs documents a requirement of an additional \$2,948,129 million in fiscal year 2016. Adding in the August \$220,000 reduction brings this total to \$3,168,129. The attached fact sheet provides details on how the additional funding would be utilized. The undersigned organizations urge you to join us in supporting a budget amendment to accomplish this goal.

Sincerely,

Appalachian Trail Conservancy

Blue Ridge Land Conservancy

Capitol Region Land Conservancy

Conservation Forestry

Flora of Virginia Project

Friends of Southwest Virginia

New River Land Trust

Northern Virginia Conservation Trust

Old Dominion Land Conservancy

Piedmont Environmental Council

Rockbridge Area Conservation Council

The Nature Conservancy

The Nature Foundation at Wintergreen

The 500-Year Forest Foundation

Valley Conservation Council, Inc.

VES Land Trust

Virginia Association for Parks

Virginia Conservation Network

Virginia Native Plant Society

Virginia Society of Ornithology

Wetlands Studies and Solutions, Inc.

Williamsburg Land Conservancy