

# 2026 Commonwealth Coastal & Marine Policy Fellowship

**Application Deadline: May 1, 2026**  
**Fellowship Start Date: October 1, 2026**



**PROJECT TITLE:**

Healthy Waters Program Field Coordinator

**HOST AGENCY & PROGRAM:**

Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, Virginia Natural Heritage Program

**LOCATION:**

Richmond, VA (*Remote work encouraged*)

**NAME OF HOST OFFICE MENTOR**

Todd Janeski

*HW Program Manager*

Greg Garman, PhD

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Will Shuart

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Anne Chazal

*Chief Biologist, Natural Heritage Program*

**OVERVIEW OF AGENCY:**

The mission of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) is to conserve Virginia's natural and recreational resources. DCR supports a variety of environmental programs organized within six areas (Administration, Natural Heritage, Planning and Recreation Resources, Soil and Water, State Parks, and Dam Safety and Floodplain Management) and numerous policy and/or advisory boards.

The Natural Heritage Program's (DCR-DNH) mission is conserving Virginia's biodiversity through inventory, protection, and stewardship. The Virginia Natural Area Preserves Act, 10.1-209 through 217 of the Code of Virginia, was passed in 1989 and codified DCR's powers and duties related to statewide biological inventory: maintaining a statewide database

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for conservation planning and project review, land protection for the conservation of biodiversity, and the protection and ecological management of natural heritage resources (the habitats of rare, threatened, and endangered species, significant natural communities, geologic sites, and other natural features). DCR-DNH represents the first comprehensive attempt to identify the most significant natural areas in the Commonwealth through an intensive statewide inventory of plants, animals, natural communities, and other features that are exemplary, rare, or endangered on a global or statewide basis.

### POTENTIAL FELLOWSHIP PROJECT:

This Fellowship will assist the DCR-DNH Healthy Waters Program (HWP) to develop capacity and implement the on-the-ground activities associated with the identification and conservation of aquatic systems characterized by high ecological integrity and identified by the HWP Interactive Stream Assessment Resource (INSTAR). The HWP is led by the DCR-DNH and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), a Virginia Sea Grant (VASG) partner University since 2005, as an aquatic resources assessment and characterization program to identify ecologically healthy waters to inform land conservation and data-driven decisions to conserve those natural systems with high aquatic integrity.

**Task 1: Development of HWP Prioritization Strategy:** The selected Fellow will work closely with the DCR and VCU to develop a strategy to prioritize the areas within the Coastal Zone of Virginia to target on-the-ground conservation efforts. The strategy will be informed by DCR, Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), and Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF) to identify and rank locations where the likelihood of success highest and aligns with the new 2025 Chesapeake Bay Goals. The prioritization will be informed by existing decision-support tools including: INSTAR data, DCR-DNH Watershed Integrity Model, DEQ 303d TMDL Impaired Waters list, Chesapeake Bay Program data and modelling products or other associated WQ programs to advance the conservation of aquatic systems as characterized by INSTAR.

**Task 2: Development and Implementation of On-the-Ground Capacity.** The selected Fellow will work locally in a selected watershed and build partnerships with DEQ, DOF, Virginia Planning District Commissions (PDCs), the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), land trusts, private landowners, land brokers, Nature Conservancy, localities, and other field partners. The selected Fellow will further refine the areas of opportunity based on locally sourced information that align with HW conservation and goals identified in the Task 1 Strategy. The HWP Field Coordinator will work with those conservation partners to effectively apply agricultural or forestry best management practices to meet local TMDL WIP measures in impaired but ecologically healthy waters to achieve shared outcomes for aquatic system conservation.

A novel aspect of this proposal is the unique relationship between DCR, VCU, Virginia CZM and VASG. DCR is the Administrator for the HWP, which it is executed through a Virginia CZM grant with VCU to provide for a Senior Program Director to

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serve as the HWP Manager. The HWP is supported with funding from DEQ from US Environmental Protection (EPA) Chesapeake Bay Implementation Grant and has been supported with EPA Section 319 Nonpoint Source Pollution Program funding. Without this relationship between DCR, Virginia CZM, DEQ and VCU, the HWP would not exist. As VCU is a partner to the VASG, the University recognizes the value of partnerships for the purpose of aquatic integrity conservation. Through this unique partnership, there will be opportunities to meet with key elected officials, senior leaders across Virginia government, academics and researchers and other sectors to gain experience in public policy. Additionally, the Fellow will learn a wide range of techniques used to conserve critical aquatic habitats in the Commonwealth.

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**PROJECT TITLE:**

Increasing Flood Resilience Planning Best Practices

**HOST AGENCY & PROGRAM:**

Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, Office of Resilience Planning

**LOCATION:**

Richmond, VA

**NAME OF HOST OFFICE MENTOR**

Matt Dalon, PE, CFM

*Office of Resilience Planning Program Manager*

Carolyn Heaps-Pecaro, CFM

*Senior Resilience Planner*

**OVERVIEW OF AGENCY:**

The Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) is the state's lead natural resource conservation agency. DCR protects what Virginians care about - natural habitat, parks, clean water, dams, open space and access to the outdoors. DCR enables and encourages people to enjoy and benefit from Virginia's natural and cultural resources. DCR values diversity of nature, culture, and communities to ensure a sustainable and equitable future for recreational access and a healthy environment for all Virginians to enjoy. DCR accomplishes its mission through funding, expertise, education, acquisition, and improved access.

DCR's Office of Resilience Planning serves as the Commonwealth's lead developer, administrator, and implementer of state-led flood resilience planning via the Virginia Coastal Resilience Master Plan (CRMP) and the Virginia Flood Protection Master Plan (VFPMP). These plans are scheduled to be developed every 5 years and must include a "whole community" approach to outreach and engagement to inform and guide the plan development.

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### POTENTIAL FELLOWSHIP PROJECT:

Nearly six million people, or 70% of the state's population, call coastal Virginia home. Our coastal regions are thriving economic hubs, hold unique cultural resources, and offer unparalleled natural beauty, which collectively shape diverse landscapes and communities. However, coastal Virginia faces growing threats. As sea levels rise and severe weather intensifies, climate change is threatening our cherished coastal regions' economic, cultural, and environmental resources. And while flooding affects many Virginians, it does not do so equally. Each community faces varying levels of flood exposure, vulnerability to harm or damage, and associated risks. Some communities are well-resourced to focus on the challenges ahead, but others lack capacity or allocated funds to address growing flood risks.

With so much at stake, we cannot afford a hands-off approach. The CRMP charts a comprehensive path toward long-term resilience to protect people, homes, businesses, infrastructure, and ecosystems from the impacts of coastal flooding. Many governments in coastal Virginia are already working to address flood risks. However, continued and coordinated efforts are needed across the whole community to build flood resilience.

The Coastal Resilience Technical Advisory Committee recommended that the DCR Office of Resilience Planning should work with the Flood Resilience Advisory Committee to establish a coordinated framework to operationalize the Coastal Resilience Master Plan at local, regional, and state scales by establishing a structure to connect the state's coastal flood resilience findings to informed and coordinated action that minimizes adverse impacts and maximizes long-term benefits. To support this recommendation, the primary responsibility of the fellow will be to support DCR to incorporate flood resilience into regional and local plans and policies through two work efforts.

The fellow will lead the development of a comprehensive inventory of flood resilience best practices currently being implemented by local governments across coastal Virginia. Approximately 25 of the 57 coastal localities are already applying such practices to manage flood risk. The purpose of this effort is to (1) Capture and document existing local flood resilience policies, (2) Identify approaches that are effective, scalable, and transferable, (3) Share these practices broadly to encourage adoption by additional localities, and (4) Support more consistent and widespread implementation of resilience measures across the coastal region. This inventory will serve as a knowledge-sharing tool to accelerate the uptake of proven resilience policies across the Commonwealth.

The second effort will focus on an interagency procedure between the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM) and the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) to incorporate DCR's flood resilience data products into regional hazard mitigation planning. Seven of the eight coastal Planning District Commissions (PDCs) have hazard mitigation plans expiring in 2027 or 2028. These PDCs will soon begin the update process, creating a timely opportunity to integrate the best available flood resilience information. A clear interagency process will improve efficiency, reduce duplication, and ensure local and regional planners have access to high quality data. This work will strengthen coordination and help communities develop hazard mitigation plans that reflect current and future flood risk.

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The fellow may also participate in other activities to support the work of the Office, including outreach and engagement for the CRMP, supporting the development of the VFPMP, staffing the Flood Resilience Advisory Committee, supporting Annual Flood Preparedness Coordination Meetings, and other duties as assigned.

The fellow will report to the Office of Resilience Planning Program Manager and work together closely with other Office staff to carry out their duties. Additionally, DCR ORP has contracted with top resilience planning and consulting firms to support the accomplishment of its work. The fellow will engage with the contracted consulting firms and other external stakeholders in carrying out the project activities.

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**PROJECT TITLE:**

Statewide Action Plan to Increase Impact of FEMA's Community Rating System (CRS)

**HOST AGENCY & PROGRAM:**

Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, Division of Floodplain Management

**LOCATION:**

Richmond, VA (*Remote location considered*)

**NAME OF HOST OFFICE MENTOR**

Angela Davis, CFM  
*Director of Floodplain Management*

**OVERVIEW OF AGENCY:**

DCR's Division of Floodplain Management works to prevent loss of life and reduce property damage due to flooding. We promote flood resilience, protection of our beneficial floodplains and the importance of carrying flood insurance.

Our planners provide technical assistance and educational outreach to localities, property owners, and interested professionals on interpreting flood maps, floodplain ordinances, and mitigation methods. We also administer the Community Flood Preparedness Fund (CFPF), which has distributed over \$300M for flood resilience efforts in communities across the Commonwealth.

As the state coordinating office for FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program, we also support the Community Rating System (CRS). CRS is a program that encourages localities to earn discounts on federally backed flood insurance by instituting higher standards than the regulatory minimums, as well as pursuing resilience-focused activities that make their communities safer and more livable. CRS participation earns Virginia residents nearly \$7 million in savings on flood insurance policies annually.

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### POTENTIAL FELLOWSHIP PROJECT:

The National Flood Insurance Program's Community Rating System, or CRS, began in 1990 as a voluntary program for recognizing and encouraging floodplain management activities that exceed minimum NFIP standards. Any community that is fully compliant with the NFIP and meets minimum eligibility criteria may join CRS.

Under the CRS, flood insurance premiums are discounted to incentivize community actions that meet these goals:

- Reduce flood damage to insurable property.
- Strengthen and support insurance aspects of the NFIP.
- Encourage a comprehensive approach to floodplain management.

There are more than 1,500 CRS communities across the country. Of Virginia's 292 NFIP-participating localities, 30 participate in the CRS, with heavy concentration in the coastal zone that stretches from Northern Virginia to Hampton Roads and the Eastern Shore. Other areas of the state could also benefit greatly from reduced flood insurance rates, thereby encouraging uptake of policies and protecting residents from property loss and the long, difficult recovery from flooding events.

Our proposed project, "Statewide Action Plan to Increase Impact of FEMA's Community Rating System" (CRS Action Plan), has three main components:

1. Identify ways to increase participation across state.
2. Perform targeted outreach to provide information to communities that may see the most benefit.
3. Advise current CRS participants on increasing their score.

A fellow would assist in identifying communities who are performing well in their floodplain management program and may be ready to join the Community Rating System. This includes considerations of local interest, capacity and degree of possible benefit. By developing a thorough familiarity with the 2025 Coordinator's Manual and a community's floodplain ordinance, the fellow would be able to identify activities for which the community may already earn credit, suggest the most easily achievable additional activities relevant to their specific resilience needs, and explain the process of entering the program. There may also be opportunities to develop or tailor templates or SOPs to help a community reach their goals.

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