



DEPARTMENT OF  
**WILDLIFE RESOURCES**  
CONSERVE. CONNECT. PROTECT.

## BUILDING VIRGINIA'S VOLUNTARY WETLANDS RESTORATION WORKFORCE

### **Name of Agency:**

Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources

### **Description of Agency:**

The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) is responsible for managing inland fisheries, all terrestrial wildlife, and recreational boating for the Commonwealth. The agency has statutory responsibility for threatened and endangered wildlife in Virginia and exercises conservation, management, regulatory, and enforcement jurisdiction over all state and federally listed wildlife, including protected marine species. The mission of the DWR is to conserve and manage wildlife populations and habitats for the benefit of present and future generations; connect people to Virginia's outdoors through boating, education, fishing, hunting, trapping, wildlife viewing and other wildlife-related activities; and protect people and property by promoting safe outdoor experiences and managing human-wildlife conflict. The agency is organized into 7 major work units (Wildlife, Fisheries, Planning & Finance, Law Enforcement, Outreach, Human Resources, and Executive Director's Office) to support its mission. The DWR manages public access and wildlife habitats on 78 Wildlife Management Areas and Wildlife Conservation Sites totaling nearly 250,000 acres and provides access to Virginia's waters at approximately 230 boating access sites. The agency also provides technical assistance to public and private landowners associated with the restoration, enhancement, and protection of a variety of priority habitats, particularly wetlands.

### **Proposed Project Title:**

Building Virginia's Voluntary Wetlands Restoration Workforce

### **Proposed Location of Work:**

The selected Fellow will be located at the DWR's headquarters office in Henrico County.

### **Proposed Project Description, Activities and Goals:**

Wetlands provide vital habitat for fish and wildlife, protect shorelines and coastal communities from erosion and storm surge, and improve water quality by trapping excess sediment and pollution. Unfortunately, over 40% of Virginia's wetland habitats have been drained or filled in to support agriculture and development, as these practices were common into the 1970s when several federal and state policies were enacted to protect wetlands and waterways.

To offset some of the historic losses, the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Agreement identified a Wetlands Outcome of creating or re-establishing 85,000 acres of tidal and non-tidal wetlands and enhancing the function of an additional 150,000 acres of degraded wetlands by 2025. This Outcome speaks directly to voluntary wetland restoration and enhance-

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ment efforts which aim to increase wetland acreage and/or function, separate from mitigation banking. Progress towards the outcome has been slow due to a lack of capacity and available funding, but several recent efforts by the Chesapeake Bay Program and partners have been initiated to address these gaps and begin making substantial gains. As part of a larger Bay-wide effort, the DWR recently led the development of the **Virginia Wetlands Action Plan** (2023, pg. A-21 to A-24), which highlights several actions and strategies to advance Wetland Outcome efforts in the state. This project will place strategic focus on one of the most immediate needs outlined in the Plan, increasing program outreach and training opportunities to build capacity for voluntary wetland project implementation.

The participating Fellow will work across the organization to accomplish five main initiatives:

1. Develop training programs and outreach materials for regionally specific workshops that cover the history and types of wetland impacts, strategies for identifying impacted wetlands, and available wetland restoration and enhancement practices.
2. Organize and lead regionally specific wetland training workshops for staff who frequently work on public lands or with private landowners (e.g., DWR, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRSC), Soil & Water Conservation Districts, Department of Forestry, and more), so that they are equipped to identify potential project opportunities and are aware of available funding programs and service providers.
3. Identify target areas and create landowner outreach material to support three ongoing NRCS initiatives: 1) the **Working Lands for Wildlife American Black Duck initiative** in Virginia, 2) efforts to expand the delivery of wetland and wildlife conservation practices on private lands within the Western Shore of the Chesapeake Bay, and 3) **Bog Turtle Conservation**.
4. Aid in field-based technical assistance activities under the supervision of DWR or partner staff members to gain on-the-ground experience in various aspects of voluntary wetland restoration and enhancement project design and implementation.
5. Participate in field-based wildlife activities, such as American Black Duck trapping and tagging, duck and goose banding, and prescribed burning, to experience and develop a greater understanding of several techniques used to monitor and manage wetland habitats and associated species.

The Fellow will also have opportunities to participate in meetings with key elected officials and senior leaders across Virginia government and other sectors to gain experience in public policy.

**Project Contact:**

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**Principal Mentor:**

- **Ben Sagara**, Statewide Wetland Project Leader, [ben.sagara@dwr.virginia.gov](mailto:ben.sagara@dwr.virginia.gov)

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**Additional Mentors:**

- **Ryan Brown**, Executive Director, [ryan.brown@dwr.virginia.gov](mailto:ryan.brown@dwr.virginia.gov)
- **Becky Gwynn**, Deputy Executive Director, [becky.gwynn@dwr.virginia.gov](mailto:becky.gwynn@dwr.virginia.gov)
- **David Norris**, Regional Wildlife Manager, [david.norris@dwr.virginia.gov](mailto:david.norris@dwr.virginia.gov)
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