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Chesapeake Executive Council acts on climate change

Regional leaders see firsthand how a changing climate is impacting the Bay watershed

Virginia Beach, Va. – Representatives from the Chesapeake Bay watershed states, the District of Columbia, the Chesapeake Bay Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) gathered today to discuss the impacts of climate change on the 64,000-square-mile Chesapeake Bay watershed—stretching from Cooperstown, New York to their meeting location at the Brock Environmental Center in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

At the meeting, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan and Chesapeake Bay Commission Chair David Bulova joined their colleagues in [signing a directive](#) that commits the Chesapeake Bay Program to address the increasing threats of climate change in all aspects of the partnership's work. In particular, Bay Program partners will utilize their world-class scientific, modeling, monitoring and planning capabilities to prioritize the communities, working lands and habitats that are most vulnerable to the risks that a changing climate is bringing to the region.

"I strongly believe that by working together as a region in a bipartisan way, we can and we will continue to find real, commonsense solutions to address climate change and to protect the Chesapeake Bay," said Maryland Governor Larry Hogan. "These challenges are too important to lose this opportunity to take action now."

Prior to the public meeting where the directive was signed, members of the Council, designees and guests joined Pamela Northam, First Lady of the Commonwealth of Virginia, and educators, including Imani Black, the founder of Minorities in Aquaculture, Melissa Deas, acting chief resiliency officer from the District of Columbia and Mark Luckenbach, associate dean of research and advisory service at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) on-board a VIMS vessel for their own [Meaningful Watershed Educational Experience](#)—a term that is unique to the Chesapeake Bay Program in describing student environmental education about and in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

While on-board, participants were able to see first-hand an area that is considered to be ground-zero for climate change. The Virginia Beach and Hampton Roads region are experiencing one of the highest rates of sea-level rise and coastal flooding on the East Coast. The [Virginia Coastal Resilience Master Planning Framework](#) notes that sea levels in the region have experienced more than 18 inches of relative sea level rise in the past 100 years and are anticipated to continue to increase at an even faster rate in the future due to heavier rainfall and other extreme weather. Members, designees and guests also viewed potential solutions to addressing climate impacts, including tree canopies, a living shoreline and an oyster restoration site.

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Conversations also centered around climate inequity, reaffirming the Council's actions from the previous year, when they [signed a statement](#) prioritizing diversity, equity, inclusion and justice in all of the Bay Program's work. In the newly implemented, [Directive No. 21-1 Collective Action for Climate Change](#), the Bay Program specifically commits to prioritizing marginalized communities in providing necessary resources, including a focus on wetlands, tree canopy and environmental literacy, to adapt to the impacts from a changing climate.

"The Climate Directive we are signing today is the latest example of why this partnership is so important," said Chesapeake Bay Commission Chair David Bulova. "Collective action allows us to apply the best science possible so that we can understand and mitigate the impacts of a changing climate and prioritize resources toward our most vulnerable communities. We need to do this if we want a more resilient landscape and watershed."

In June 2014, the Executive Council signed the [Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement](#), with the vision of fostering an environmentally and economically sustainable watershed with clean water, abundant life, conserved lands and access to the water, a vibrant cultural heritage, and a diversity of engaged citizens and stakeholders.

Established over 37 years ago, the [Chesapeake Executive Council](#) is responsible for guiding the policy agenda and setting conservation and restoration goals for the regional, watershed partnership, the Chesapeake Bay Program. Members include the governors of Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia, the mayor of the District of Columbia, the chair of the Chesapeake Bay Commission and the administrator of the EPA on behalf of the federal government. Virginia Governor Ralph Northam currently chairs the Chesapeake Executive Council which will next meet in Richmond, Virginia in December 2021.

"A healthier Chesapeake Bay depends on a targeted, science-based approach that accounts for climate change," said Virginia Governor Ralph Northam. "It will take bold, urgent actions to reach our goal of a Bay that is fully restored by 2025. Virginia commits to working diligently with our watershed partners to meet this commitment in a resilient, practical, cost effective manner that benefits our vast waterways, our environment, and our economy."