



Coalition to promote spending on environment in Virginia

By SCOTT HARPER, The Virginian-Pilot

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An unlikely alliance of business leaders, environmentalists and sportsmen announced a campaign Monday to reverse a statistic they view as embarrassing and troubling: Virginia ranks last in the nation in state spending for environmental programs.

The new coalition, VirginiaForever, will urge state lawmakers to set aside more money for natural resources, beginning next month when the General Assembly convenes in Richmond.

The coalition's 13 members include Smithfield Foods, the Homebuilders Association of Virginia and Dominion Virginia Power, the state's largest power utility.

The three groups often have been criticized by the environmentalists now joining hands with them.

"We've never put together a coalition with so many different voices," said Michael Lipford, state director of The Nature Conservancy, an international environmental group. "But that shows the level of commitment to this issue. This is a long-term arrangement we're talking about, to get us back on the right track."

The U.S. Census Bureau determined that in 2000, Virginia spent less per capita on environmental protections than any other state.

Facing more budget deficits this year, Gov. Mark R. Warner has proposed a two-year, \$59 billion budget with modest increases for environmental programs, up about \$37.7 million.

Most of that new money would come from a permanent \$10 fee for recording documents in state courts. The funds would pay for conserving sensitive lands and cleaning up state waterways.

But even if it is approved by lawmakers, the additional money would not change Virginia's ranking as last among the 50 states, according to analysts.

Also Monday, the coalition released a new poll showing that 61 percent of Virginia voters "in general, are willing to pay a little extra each month to protect water, open space, fisheries, wildlife and recreational areas."

The poll of 600 registered voters statewide found that 31 percent would support increased fees or taxes of no more than \$2 per month per taxpayer earmarked for environmental programs.

Only 1 percent of those questioned said they would back increases of more than \$10 a month.

Kim Tingley, past president of the Homebuilders Association of Virginia, said his trade group is concerned that little money for the environment means poor, unpredictable service from state regulators.

"A well-funded, fair, efficient regulatory process is good for business," Tingley said. "Companies that might be moving into a new state want such a process."

Similarly, Eva Hardy, Dominion's vice president for external affairs, said that one of Virginia's biggest attractions to incoming employers is its nice quality of life, which includes a clean and scenic natural landscape.

"We discovered that environmentalists want the same thing as we do: a clean environment, which is obviously good for business," Hardy said. "That's really what this coalition is all about."

VirginiaForever will be based at The Nature Conservancy's office in Richmond. It was funded by a \$75,000 grant from the Virginia Environmental Endowment, a nonprofit group. Participants will be asked to contribute money to keep the effort afloat after this year.

Other members include the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, DuPont, the Garden Club of Virginia and the American Lung Association of Virginia.

Reach Scott Harper at 446-2340 or at scott.harper@pilotonline.com.