



**Pooling resources
Apparent adversaries unite for the commonwealth's environment**

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UNDAUNTED BY THE prospect of trying to squeeze blood from a turnip, a new coalition calling itself VirginiaForever is headed to Richmond next month to advocate increased environmental spending in Virginia. The group's 13 charter members are at first glance an eclectic assortment. They include the Nature Conservancy and Smithfield Foods (!), the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and the Home Builders Association of Virginia (!), and the American Lung Association of Virginia and Dominion Virginia Power (sorry, Philip Morris took a bye).

Each of these companies and organizations is officially troubled by the tiny amount of Virginia's budget--less than 1 percent--that the state devotes to environmental and natural-resource protection. They are collectively embarrassed that such little funding puts Virginia dead last among the 50 states in per capita environmental spending.

Gov. Warner's proposed budget would increase spending from about \$254 million this year to an average of \$292 million in each of the next two years. But that's still less than 1 percent of the total budget, and it fails to elevate Virginia's dead-last ranking. Hoping for something better, the coalition will go to the General Assembly armed with poll results that show 61 percent of Virginia voters consider protection of state waters, open space, recreational areas, fish, and wildlife a worthwhile cause for which they would not mind paying a little extra.

Of course, there are also polls that show voters favor more spending on education, health care, and highways. Those are on the shelf right next to the polls that say voters favor tax cuts.

Another contradiction: Even if the group's members succeed in drawing attention--and funding--to environmental problems, which would be welcome news, they might not see eye-to-eye on how that money should be spent. Those whose motives are truly green--who want to save the bay, preserve parkland, or clean the air--might conflict with polluting firms whose goal is to improve the state's regulatory process.

This united front notwithstanding, there is one rule that won't change: The cost of resource protection is shared by government and business. Victory for the coalition's environmental and advocacy groups will certainly mean changes in the way its corporate and trade members do business.

Yes, individual coalition members want to see additional funding, but do they want it spent on better wastewater-treatment plants, more bureaucrats, or regulatory streamlining mechanisms? Though this motley crew may find it hard truly singing from the same hymnal, let's hope their efforts produce some joyful noises for Virginia's undernurtured natural resources.