



2017 SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

Legislative Victories

On your behalf, the Council was successful in advocating for you on a wide variety of legislative proposals this year.

Produce Safety Rule

In 2011, Congress enacted the federal Food Safety Modernization Act. Six years after going into law, new Produce Safety Rules were adopted for certain produce operations. Working with our producers who are impacted by these new federal requirements, we successfully gained passage of legislation that ensured that food safety inspections on these farms were conducted by VDACS versus a federal regulator. Virginia farmers asked for a law to allow state personnel to work with them on education and compliance with the Produce Safety Law, versus federal implementation and inspections by FDA, ensuring timely response and an educate-first approach to regulation of these farms.

“VAC was instrumental in working to pass legislation that allows me to work with the Virginia Department of Agriculture produce inspectors instead of solely with federal inspectors from the FDA. I know my state inspectors and have a relationship with them, so if there is a problem we can fix it quickly. The FDA takes weeks or months to respond and would cost me thousands of dollars in produce that is just sitting waiting on their response.”

-Kevin Kirby, Kirby Farms

Overweight Permits For Hauling Virginia-Grown Farm Products

Virginia farmers who haul farm products grown on their operations on state roads (not interstates) will now benefit from a new state-wide overweight truck allowance. We worked with legislators and our partners to pass a law that authorizes the DMV to issue overweight permits for vehicles hauling Virginia-grown farm products from the point of origin to the first place of delivery. This legislation takes the current five axle gross truck weight from 84K pounds to 90K pounds across the commonwealth.

Small Agricultural Electric Generation Program

With increased interest in alternative energy generation (including solar), a new state law was passed that creates a program under which small agricultural generators may sell the electricity generated from a small agricultural generating facility to its utility. This new program would apply to those who operate their renewable generation facility as part of an agricultural business and caps the capacity of the generation facility and the land utilized for the renewable generation. The agricultural generator could then “sell back” its renewable energy to a utility for a premium price during peak hours when the utilities are heavily utilized.

Increased Distance For Use of Farm-Use Vehicles

As agricultural businesses become more and more spread out in certain areas of the state, the Council worked with legislators to increase the distance from 50 to 75 miles for maximum travel distance when utilizing farm use tags. In addition, the new law also provides that any law-enforcement officer may require any person claiming the farm use exemption to provide, upon request, the address of the farm or lands owned or leased by the vehicle's owner, or if such address is unavailable or unknown, the real property parcel identification number of such land.

Defeated State-Level Regulation of Above Ground Storage Tanks

A proposal to direct DEQ to regulate aboveground storage tanks that measure more than 5,000 gallons in capacity and are used to contain dangerous substances other than oil was quickly defeated in subcommittee after the Council testified to its negative impacts. It would have required regulations that establish construction standards, requirements for registration, certification, and inspection, and other requirements of tank owners and establish a schedule of fees.

"VAC has been an invaluable resource to me and my business. In the 2017 session, they blocked harmful legislation that would have cost me thousands of dollars (if not more) in new regulations for chemical storage. VAC is a great resource to inform me of legislation that could positively or negatively affect my business. Until I became involved with the Council, I never knew how well respected they are by the Virginia Legislature and how often they are used as a source of knowledge on agriculture issues. In today's environment, it is vitally important for your voice to be heard as legislative decisions are made that affect the agricultural community." -Kern Houff, Houff Corporation

Defeated GMO Labeling at State level

We worked to defeat a bill that would have required certain products containing a genetically modified organism (GMO) to bear a label stating, "Congress prohibits states from requiring the on-package labeling of the GMO content of this product.", and required retail food stores to post notices and information sheets regarding bioengineered foods and to install digital scanners to read the matrix barcodes that certain packaged foods may use to provide information on GMO content.

State Budget Related Issues

The state budget was cut significantly to address funding shortfalls, however, the Council successfully advocated to retain and restore several critical state programs and initiatives.

"Given the uncertainty of water quality benchmarks and year over year availability of critical cost share resources, it is imperative that agriculture groups collaborate to assure our message of support for, and efficient use of, these resources are shared with legislators. Virginia Cattlemen's Association producer members have, and will continue to, benefit from our partnership with Virginia Agribusiness Council, their extraordinary staff and the respect fostered by a unified industry voice." – Jason Carter, Executive Director, Virginia Cattlemen's Association

- **Ag Best Management Practices (Ag BMPs) Cost Share** - Total funding for Ag BMPs in FY18 will be approximately \$15 million, plus \$500,000 for CREP, and \$2.1 million for technical Assistance. This is in part thanks to an additional \$6.7 million in funding from the Water Quality Improvement Fund Reserve that we advocated to be authorized for distribution to farmers through cost-share.
- **Reforestation of Timberlands (RT) Incentive Program** - Restored \$300,000 in funds for the RT program, ensuring the full state funding match was maintained for this program. Additionally, \$113,360 was restored from general funds for an accounting system.
- **DOF Water Quality Inspection Notification Fee** - Proposed water quality inspection fee was eliminated for logging jobs, and \$500,000 was restored to fund DOF operations.
- **Wildlife Damage Cooperative Program** - Funding was restored for the Wildlife Damage Cooperative Program (Coyote and Black Vulture Technical Assistance), a cooperative agreement with USDA. This was cut in the Governor's introduced budget.
- **Virginia Cooperative Extension and Agriculture Research** - The General Assembly restored \$2.04 million to Virginia Cooperative Extension, and language was included to correct the funding formula for positions in this agency. This will correct a funding concern and help to ensure long-term funding stability for VCE. Additionally, language was included to seek a plan for future positions or capital needs to support economic development opportunities for agriculture and forestry, and a study mandated to direct Virginia Tech and Virginia State to develop solutions for addressing the shortage of agriculture teachers in the Commonwealth.