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HOUSE BILL NO. 309

Offered January 10, 2024

Prefiled January 5, 2024

A *BILL to amend the Code of Virginia by adding in Article 1 of Chapter 11 of Title 10.1 a section numbered 10.1-1103.1, relating to Department of Forestry; Forest Conservation Plan required.*

Patron—Hope

Referred to Committee on Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

1. That the Code of Virginia is amended by adding in Article 1 of Chapter 11 of Title 10.1 a section numbered 10.1-1103.1 as follows:

§ 10.1-1103.1. Forest Conservation Plan.

A. The Department shall establish a Forest Conservation Plan (the Plan) to conserve the Commonwealth's forest resources that identifies and incentivizes the protection of forests and other similar sensitive natural areas as an integral part of state forestry planning and the local comprehensive planning process. In developing the Plan, the Department shall (i) examine the current status and trends of forests and tree canopies in the Commonwealth; (ii) identify threats to forest and tree canopy conservation efforts including development, climate change, and invasive species; (iii) identify priority forests for conservation using the Department's Forest Conservation Value Model; (iv) incorporate local forest-related and tree canopy-related goals; (v) identify current and potential funding streams and state and local entities that will be vital to achieve forest and tree canopy conservation goals; and (vi) prioritize potential forest conservation efforts in areas adjacent to streams or wetlands, areas with steep slopes or highly erodible soils, and areas adjacent to wildlife corridors or large contiguous blocks of forest.

B. The Plan shall be developed in coordination with a stakeholder advisory group that shall include representatives from the Department of Environmental Quality, agricultural and forestry industries, environmental and conservation organizations, local governments, the Virginia Cooperative Extension, professional environmental technical experts, and other stakeholders as the Department deems appropriate.

C. The Department shall update the Plan at least once every five years. Following any such update, the Plan shall be made available on its website and submitted to the Governor and the Chairmen of the House Committee on Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources and the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Natural Resources.

2. That the initial Forest Conservation Plan required by § 10.1-1103.1 of the Code of Virginia, as created by this act, shall be established by November 1, 2025. The Department of Forestry shall post the Plan on its website and submit the Plan to the Governor and the Chairmen of the House Committee on Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources and the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Natural Resources no later than November 30, 2025.

INTRODUCED

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