

Chesapeake National Recreation Area Fact Sheet

Senator Chris Van Hollen and Congressman John Sarbanes are pleased to introduce legislation that will designate a unified Chesapeake National Recreation Area (CNRA) as part of the National Park System. The legislation was developed through collaboration with a broad range of stakeholders represented on the working group that Senator Van Hollen and Congressman Sarbanes convened last year, and informed by feedback during a 6-month public comment period. The CNRA will utilize a collection of partnerships with states, localities, and private entities with the intent of highlighting the landscape and national significance of the Chesapeake Bay. This will deliver more federal resources to the watershed region, celebrate its diverse cultural and economic history, conserve the Bay's environment, and foster public access to this national treasure while also spurring economic growth.

The CNRA will increase diverse public access to the Chesapeake Bay and strengthen the culture of stewardship across the region. Additionally, the CNRA will highlight the stories that often go untold – those of Indigenous peoples; free and enslaved Blacks; the role the Bay played in the earliest days of the Maryland and Virginia Colonies; the key part the Bay has played, and continues to play, in the region's economy; and the story of watermen and -women who are essential to the economic success and health of the Bay region. Everyone who resides in the watershed has an important role in Bay conservation and culture.

Through this legislation:

- The National Park Service (NPS) will be permitted to acquire or partner with Burtis House, Whitehall, Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, and the North Beach of Fort Monroe by voluntary sale or donation to serve as the first sites within the CNRA;
- A CNRA Advisory Commission of local stakeholders will be tasked with advising the NPS on the design and implementation of the CNRA management plan and make recommendations for additional partner sites and property to be added to the CNRA;
- NPS may **only** acquire additional lands or property through voluntary donation, purchase from a willing seller, exchange, or transfer from another agency in consultation with the CNRA Advisory Commission;
- NPS can enter into voluntary “opt-in” partner site and cooperative management agreements with and provide federal funding to state and local governments, tribal governments, non-profit organizations, educational institutions, and private landowners that wish to be included in the CNRA, in consultation with the CNRA Advisory Commission;
- NPS is directed to collect community feedback and conduct transportation planning on the initial CNRA sites, in accordance with the NPS planning process, prioritizing water and trail access;
- The Superintendent of the NPS Chesapeake Bay Office will administer the existing Chesapeake Gateways Program in coordination with the CNRA; and
- The Chesapeake Gateways Program is permanently reauthorized at \$6 million annually.

This draft legislation explicitly would not:

- Authorize NPS to impose any additional regulations on recreational or commercial business activities in the Chesapeake Bay waters, including existing water navigation and fishing activities;
- Authorize NPS to supersede state authority in fish and wildlife management efforts;
- Authorize NPS to acquire property from unwilling landowners; nor
- Authorize NPS to impose any additional regulations governing non-participating private or public landowners.

A Brief History of the CNRA:

The concept of the Chesapeake National Recreation Area has been discussed as far back as the 1980s, spurred by an op-ed in the Capital Gazette and work by Anne Arundel County Executive Jim Lighthizer and later followed in the 1990s by the efforts of Senator Paul Sarbanes. Driven by Senator Sarbanes, in 2004 the National Park Service (NPS) released a special resource study which found that the Chesapeake Bay is “unquestionably nationally significant and a major part of the nation’s heritage.” Shortly after Senator Van Hollen’s election to the Senate, the Senator and Congressman Sarbanes began discussing the possibility of a designated Chesapeake National Recreation Area. In 2019, the lawmakers began working on the effort, requesting drafting service from NPS to pursue a national recreation area designation for the Chesapeake Bay. The effort has garnered widespread bipartisan support, and in 2020, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan and Virginia Governor Ralph Northam shared their backing of the concept in letters to Congress. Senator Van Hollen and Congressman Sarbanes continued to pursue the effort, and in 2021, formally announced a [working group](#) to foster further discussion with stakeholders and community members on the project. In June 2022, the lawmakers released a set of [guiding principles](#) to serve as a foundation for the discussion draft of the legislation that was released in November 2022. Following more than a half year of public feedback, the legislators compiled a [FAQ](#) and introduced the [revised](#) Chesapeake National Recreation Area Act in the House and Senate in July 2023. The bill, which is the next significant milestone in this historic process, has been [endorsed](#) by more than 100 groups. Those interested in the CNRA may visit <https://www.vanhollen.senate.gov/CNRA> to learn more and follow updates.

Members of the CNRA Working Group: Senators Ben Cardin (D-Md.), Mark Warner (D-Va.), and Tim Kaine (D-Va.) and Representatives Bobby Scott (D-Va.) and Rob Wittman (R-Va.), the State of Maryland; the Commonwealth of Virginia; Chesapeake Conservancy; the Chesapeake Bay Commission; the National Parks Conservation Association; Choose Clean Water Coalition; the Conservation Fund; the Chesapeake Bay Foundation; Maryland League of Conservation Voters; the Nature Conservancy; Potomac Conservancy; REI; the National Trust for Historic Preservation; the American Sportfishing Association; the National Marine Manufacturing Association; the Watermen of Maryland; the Sport Fishing Commission; Historic Annapolis; Oyster Recovery Partnership; Blue Oyster Environmental LLC; Preservation Virginia; Shellfish Growers of Virginia; the James River Association; Virginia Interfaith Power & Light; Marine Trades Association of Maryland; the Audubon Naturalist Society; Living Classrooms; the Hispanic Access Foundation; Latino Outdoors; Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project (SERCAP); Chispa Maryland; Baltimore Tree Trust; Blacks of the Chesapeake Foundation, Clean Chesapeake Coalition, Verna Harrison Associates, Maryland Department of Natural Resources Sport Fisheries Advisory Commission; the National Aquarium; Morgan State University Patuxent Environmental & Aquatic Research Laboratory; the Wilderness Society; the Brandywine Foundation; the United States Lighthouse Society; and the Fort Monroe Authority.