Efforts to clean the air at Shenandoah

A new campaign to set limits on haze and smog pollution

Shenandoah National Park, with its sweeping views of the Blue Ridge Mountains, is an essential part of Virginia’s natural heritage and a refuge from the clamor of the Beltway. Unfortunately, dingy haze, primarily from upwind coal plants, can pose health risks to the 1.5 million people who visit annually. It also shrouds some of Shenandoah’s most famous vistas—including the view from Old Rag’s summit.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is now considering new rules that would limit the amount of ozone and haze-forming pollutants allowed in the air. Environment Virginia is working to set and enforce these new regulations—and defeat attempts by Congress to unravel them.

Clouded views from Old Rag

On a clear day, you used to be able to see more than 100 miles from Old Rag, beyond the Washington Monument. But today, air pollution can truncate the view to just 25 miles—and sometimes less than one.

Further, air pollution in Shenandoah can exceed levels deemed safe by the American Lung Association. And, with eight new coal-fired power plants proposed in the park’s immediate vicinity, the problem could soon escalate.

“We shouldn’t have to worry about air quality when we plan our summer trips to Shenandoah,” said Anna Aurilio, Environment Virginia’s federal legislative director. “For the EPA to set new rules, they need to know the people of Virginia support them, even if the polluters don’t.”

Congress fights new rules

With some vocal opponents of the Clean Air Act throwing their weight around in Congress, Environment Virginia, along with our national federation, Environment America, the American Lung Association and other public health organizations are building support to make sure the EPA’s proposals go through.

“We need our legislators to stand up and protect our health and our air, not work to weaken the Clean Air Act and other public health safeguards,” Aurilio said.

Smog from dozens of coal-fired plants obscures the view from Dickey Ridge.

Shenandoah vista.

Links to additional content are posted posted on our website:

www.EnvironmentVirginia.org
Recent action

President pushes for conservation funding

Margie Alt, the director of our national federation, joined President Barack Obama at the White House in February for the announcement that he’d seek the renewal of the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund.

What’s the Land and Water Conservation Fund? For the past 45 years the federal government has put a fraction of the revenue from offshore drilling into a trust fund to expand national parks, protect hunting and fishing areas, and aid local conservation and recreation projects like city parks and playing fields.

In 2010, the Land and Water Conservation Fund spent money protecting important natural places in Virginia, including the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge and areas along the James River.

Our staff is currently building support for the approval of the conservation funding in Congress.

2010 was a breakthrough year for solar

In an otherwise lackluster year for the economy the solar industry shone brighter than ever before in 2010, with a 67 percent increase in the amount of solar energy projects installed across America compared to 2009.

That means millions more homes and businesses powered by pollution-free solar energy, an increase made possible by strong solar policies implemented at the urging of Environment Virginia and our national federation, Environment America. In December, Clean Energy Advocate Sean Garren led our charge in Congress to extend critical incentives for solar power.

Environment Virginia staff, along with allies from Environment America, continue to strategize with entrepreneurs within the solar industry to hit a far more ambitious benchmark: getting 10 percent of our nation’s energy from solar by 2030.
James River under attack

Congress tries to block EPA from protecting critical source waters

Over the last decade, polluters have been able to chip away at key protections in the Clean Water Act, leaving the James River—and the streams that feed it—in need of stronger protections from pollution.

The good news is that the Environmental Protection Agency is moving to update clean water standards and restore critical protections. It’s an important advance for our waters, but far from a done deal given opposition from polluters and attempts by some members of Congress to block the EPA from doing its job.

EPA targeted by polluters

Earlier in the year, lobbyists for factory farms, developers and other polluters got their allies on Capitol Hill to include a number of amendments that strip environmental protections as part of the budget process. Among the amendments was one that would slash funding for preventing sewage overflows and block the EPA from taking action to restore Clean Water Act protections.

Further, a pair of recent Supreme Court decisions opened a loophole in the Clean Water Act, potentially putting at risk up to 57 percent of Virginia’s streams—essentially giving polluters license to dump with impunity. As one EPA lawyer put it, “When companies figure out the cops can’t operate, they start remembering how much cheaper it is to just dump stuff in a nearby creek.” With billions of pounds of sewage flowing into waterways across the country, Virginia cannot afford to take that risk.

Environment Virginia and our allies across the country worked to expose the polluter influence behind the amendments, and to show broad public support for clean water protections. On Feb. 14, we presented EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson with thousands of Valentines for clean water signed by citizens in strong support of protections for our waters.

On March 9, the Senate, backed by Sens. Mark Warner and Jim Webb, rejected the budget package containing these anti-clean water amendments by a margin of 56-44, but there is little doubt that polluters will try again soon.

Environment Virginia’s next steps

Joining with our sister groups across the country, we plan to show the EPA the backing it needs to forge ahead and update protections for our waters—despite attempts by polluters and their allies in Congress to block this progress.

To learn more about the threats facing Virginia’s waters, and to find out what you can do to help, visit our website.

Is nuclear power worth the risk?

Our hearts go out to the people of Japan who, after seeing a massive earthquake and tsunami strike their country, were forced to contend with an escalating nuclear crisis.

At press time, the consequences were still unfolding: Drinking water samples in Tokyo were contaminated with radioactive iodine at a level dangerous to infants; the sale of a dozen types of produce from the Fukushima region was banned due to potentially dangerous levels of radioactivity; hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated from the area around the reactors; and high radiation levels were found in the nearby ocean waters.

Should we be concerned about America’s 104 nuclear plants posing similar risks to our children’s health and our environment? Based on our analysis, yes. At its most basic level, Mother Nature proved stronger than the best safeguards that Japan could design. Why would we be different?

Environment Virginia is urging the Obama administration and others to improve the safety of existing nuclear plants, declare a moratorium on new plants, and begin to responsibly phase out our use of nuclear power in favor of clean, renewable energy, like wind and solar power. For more, visit www.EnvironmentVirginia.org.

Read more about Environment Virginia’s efforts to promote renewable energy online at: www.EnvironmentVirginia.org/energy

Surry Nuclear Power Station in Surry County, Va.
In compliance with federal efforts to clean up the Chesapeake Bay, Virginia agencies finalized a comprehensive restoration plan this December, designed to reduce water pollution to safe levels. The plan—Gov. Bob McDonnell’s second draft—imposes new rules on some of the Bay’s worst polluters, most notably developers and agribusinesses. Unfortunately, some of these special interests are fighting back, lobbying Gov. McDonnell for weaker pollution standards and even waging a federal lawsuit to block implementation.

That’s why Environment Virginia is urging Gov. McDonnell to stand by the terms of his restoration plan and enforce reasonable, science-based measures to limit pollution from developers and factory farms.

“We can’t let polluters and their powerful cronies undermine every attempt at Bay restoration,” said Piper Crowell, clean water advocate out of Environment Virginia’s federal office in Washington, D.C.