



RIVERREPS Advocacy Toolkit 2020

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ABOUT THE JAMES RIVER AND JRA

THE JAMES RIVER is Virginia's largest river, flowing from the mountains in Botetourt County to the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay in Hampton Roads. At 340 miles long with 25,000 miles of streams, the James is Virginia's largest tributary to the Chesapeake Bay. Its watershed encompasses almost a quarter of the state and a third of its residents -- who rely on the James for safe drinking water, economic prosperity, and quality of life. As America's Founding River, the James River's history is unparalleled, nourishing Native American communities for thousands of years before becoming a haven for the first permanent English settlement in North America and the home of America's first colonial capital and multiple founding fathers and presidents.

OUR MISSION at the James River Association is to be a guardian for the James, to provide a voice for the river and take action to promote conservation and responsible stewardship of its natural resources. **We protect** the river by monitoring its health, responding to problems, seeking policy solutions, and implementing on-the-ground restoration projects. **We connect** communities to the river by promoting better river access, hosting volunteer activities, and providing environmental education opportunities to thousands of students each year.

WHY WE ADVOCATE

The actions of our government – at the local, state and federal levels – have an enormous impact on all of us and the natural resources we rely on, including the James River. When policy-makers turn a blind eye to potential risks, we face life-changing and costly consequences. Improper chemical disposal and inadequate river protections in the 1970s led to contamination so severe it shut down parts of the lower James River to commercial fishing for over a decade. This disastrous episode proved that we need strong policies that keep our river, and all who use it, safe.

At JRA, we are a voice for the James, identifying the risks facing our river and sharing solutions that will produce results for clean water and healthy waterways. We partner with other conservation organizations to take our message to Washington, urging Members of Congress to support critical programs like the Chesapeake Bay Cleanup effort and bedrock environmental laws like the Clean Water Act. We walk the halls of the State Capital building in Richmond, talking with lawmakers about upcoming votes and pressing issues. We engage with the Governor and his staff as they set priorities and craft budgets. And we work with state and federal agencies charged with conserving our natural resources for future generations to enjoy.

HOW WE ADVOCATE

Keeping track of what’s moving at the local, state, and federal level is a full time job. But for those of us that aren’t professional lobbyists or politicians on CNN, there is good news: these endless and overlapping policy cycles repeat themselves at predictable times. **At JRA, we follow these cycles to identify the key decision points so that we can engage policy-makers at the right time to promote smart choices for clean water.**

Fall	The Governor crafts his budget bill for the upcoming fiscal year. We’ll urge him to include enough clean water and land conservation funding to improve the health of the James River. We share that same message with other state lawmakers as they prepare and set priorities for the upcoming General Assembly session. And we remind our members to get out and vote for candidates that will fight for a healthy James River.
Winter	Virginia’s General Assembly is in session. We meet with lawmakers about the bills they are voting on and the funding decisions they are making, urging them to make the right choice for the James.
Spring	In D.C., our Members of Congress are setting their priorities for how federal tax dollars should be spent. We remind them that programs like the Chesapeake Bay Cleanup are critically important to protect Virginia’s natural resources.
Summer	Members of Congress vote on legislation and spending bills that could have a big impact on local projects that protect clean water and the James River. We work with our partners to make recommendations on key votes. We also invite lawmakers to see their choices in action by taking part in the educational, restoration, and conservation programs happening in their districts.
Year round	Federal and State agencies announce new or amended regulations, grant permits for regulated activities, and take enforcement action for regulatory violations. We review the proposals, attend public meetings, and submit concerns and suggestions during public comment periods.

WHY WE NEED YOUR HELP

By adding your voice to ours, you can help us amplify our message: a healthy James River is irreplaceable. Our collective voice can convince policy-makers to make clean water and land conservation a priority as they craft budgets and draft legislation. We’ll help you identify solutions to the problems facing our river, but you add the most important part of the message: **your personal story of what a healthy James means to you and your community.** Our elected officials need to know that their constituents value clean water, that their actions have consequences, and that we’re all paying attention. Rivers don’t vote, but river enthusiasts do!

4 KEYS TO AN EFFECTIVE MESSAGE

1) Know the Problem and Identify a Solution

Stay up to date on the risks facing the James River by reviewing the current [State of the James](#) report, checking our [Take Action](#) webpage for ongoing action campaigns, and scanning your inbox for the latest JRA email alerting you to an urgent issue.

Each year, JRA sets a legislative agenda that identifies the issues we expect to be working on at the General Assembly. It includes what we're asking for and why. You can help share that message directly with your state legislators, family, friends, and neighbors.

Have an issue you want to share, but need some help refining your ask or selecting the right audience? Let us know! We can help.

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1. Know the Problem, Find a Solution
 2. Right Audience, Right Time
 3. Keep it Simple, Direct, and Personal
 4. Follow-up

2) Pick the Right Audience at the Right Time

Throughout the year, JRA will alert you to critical decisions being made, who is making those decisions, and what message they need to hear. We'll suggest ways that you can help us spread the message:

- Send suggested comments to a state agency about an upcoming regulatory decision;
- Contact your elected representatives over the phone, by email, or in person and urge them to take a specific action;
- Submit a Letter to the Editor of your local paper sharing your opinion on an important issue up for debate;
- Share an article or email from JRA with friends and family or on social media, and urge others to join you in taking action.

To get started, [find your representatives](#) and know their record on issues critical to the James River. Know where your fellow community members turn to for information. Whether it's in print, online, over the air, or on the radio waves, who is reporting on local issues and sharing analysis with your community?

3) Keep it Simple, Keep it Direct, and Personalize your Story

The most effective messages are clear and quick to read. Who are you? What action are you asking policy-makers to take? Why is it the right choice? And most importantly, how will it affect you and your

community? An elected official's first duty is to their constituents back home. It's not just about the right thing to do. **It's about the right thing to do for your community.** Your story makes the choice more personal and the message more impactful.

Remember to make sure your ask is direct and easy to identify. "Vote YES on House Bill XXXX." "Provide more funding for conservation practices on Virginia farms." "Reject this harmful change to the Clean Water Act regulations."

4) Follow-up with a Thank You or a Reminder

Making an ask is important. But following up on the result is equally so. When policy-makers do the right thing, particularly when it's a tough position to take, thank them for making the right choice.

Didn't get the response you wanted? Remind your elected officials why their actions will have consequences for the James River, clean water, and their constituents. Encourage them to reconsider in the future. Then keep their choices in mind when you head to the polls.

RIVERREP PLEDGE



APPENDIX

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

James River Association

- [State of the James](http://www.stateofthejames.org) - www.stateofthejames.org
- [Advocacy Program](http://www.thejamesriver.org/programs/advocacy) - www.thejamesriver.org/programs/advocacy
- [Take Action](http://www.thejamesriver.org/what-you-can-do/take-action) - www.thejamesriver.org/what-you-can-do/take-action
- [RiverReps](http://www.thejamesriver.org/what-you-can-do/riverrep-program) - www.thejamesriver.org/what-you-can-do/riverrep-program

State Government Resources

- [Who's My Legislator?](http://whosmy.viriniageneralassembly.gov) - whosmy.viriniageneralassembly.gov
- [Legislative Information Service](http://www.lis.virginia.gov) - www.lis.virginia.gov - Official website for Virginia legislative information
- [LIS State Budget](http://www.budget.lis.virginia.gov) - www.budget.lis.virginia.gov - Official website for Virginia's Biennial State Budget
- [Virginia Conservation Network](http://www.vcnva.org) - www.vcnva.org Over 100 conservation community partners speaking with one coordinated voice to protect Virginia's natural resources
 - ["Our Common Agenda"](#) - A briefing book with in-depth analysis of conservation issues facing Virginia
 - [Bill Tracker](#) - The Virginia conservation community's position on specific legislation and budget amendments.

Federal Government Resources

- Congress.gov - Official website for U.S. federal legislative information
- [Choose Clean Water Coalition](http://www.chooscleanwater.org) - www.chooscleanwater.org - Non-government organizations dedicated to restoring the Chesapeake Bay and all of its tributary rivers and streams

TIPS AND CHECKLISTS

IN-PERSON MEETINGS

- ❑ Scheduling
 - ❑ [Find your representatives](#) and call the office phone number.
 - ❑ Identify yourself as a constituent, ask to make an appointment, and let them know what issue you would like to discuss.
 - ❑ Be flexible. Different committees meet at certain times on certain days, so your representative may be unavailable.
 - ❑ Ask to meet with a staff member if your representative is unavailable.
- ❑ Before the meeting
 - ❑ Have a plan for what you want to say, but don't feel the need to be an expert. The key message is that you care about clean water and a healthy James River.
 - ❑ Do a bit of homework on your representative. Are they a leader on an important legislative committee? Do they hold significant influence within their party? Are they a champion on these issues, or do they tend to oppose your position?
 - ❑ Bring copies of JRA's current policy agenda or VCN's fact sheets about the issue you want to talk about. If you don't know what to bring, ask a member of our advocacy team, and we'll help you find good resources.
- ❑ During the meeting,
 - ❑ Be friendly, be clear, be honest, and be brief!
 - ❑ Introduce yourself as a constituent. Let them know where you're from and your ties to the community.
 - ❑ Introduce the issue and ask how familiar they are with it. Their answer will tell you how much background information you should share before getting to your request.
 - ❑ Make a direct ask for the action you want them to take and ask for their support. If they agree, thank them. If they have a different position, ask why and what it would take for them to change their position. Listen carefully and be respectful.
 - ❑ Be mindful of the time. You may have more meetings to get to, and your representative will likely have committee and caucus meetings.
 - ❑ Don't forget to leave your fact sheets and a business card if you have one.
- ❑ After the meeting
 - ❑ Send a thank you note for their time. You can even bring thank you notes with you, and leave one that same day.
 - ❑ If your representative asked for more information, be sure to follow up with what they asked for. JRA can help.
 - ❑ Let JRA's advocacy team know what you learned during the meeting. It will help us refine our strategy.
 - ❑ Keep tabs on what impact your meeting may have had! If your representative makes the right choice, be sure to acknowledge it with a thanks! If they choose an opposing position, ask them to reconsider.

PHONE CALLS

- [Find your representative](#) and the number for their official office.
- Before you call
 - Have a plan for what you want to say.
 - Try to find out where your representative stands on the issue. If they already support your position, a quick “thank you, and keep up the good work!” is all you need.
- During the call
 - Be clear, polite, positive, and brief.
 - Identify yourself and let them know you are a constituent.
 - Depending on your comfort level, ask to speak with the staff member who works on this issue. Prefer to keep it short? Say you’d like to leave a message for your representative.
 - Clearly state what action you would like your representative to take and why. The more specific you can be about what you would like them to do, the better. JRA’s policy agenda or VCN’s fact sheets can help.
 - Leave your contact information so that your representative or their staff can follow up.
- After the call
 - Let JRA know what you may have learned during your call.
 - Follow up after your representative takes action. Thank them for doing the right thing, or urge them to reconsider if they did not make the right choice.

WRITTEN MESSAGES

- [Find your representative](#) and the preferred method of contact. Some offices may refer constituents to their website where they can leave a message. Others may have a direct email address.
- Your message
 - Be clear, polite, positive, and brief.
 - Identify yourself and let them know you are a constituent.
 - Clearly state what action you would like your representative to take and why. The more specific you can be about what you would like them to do, the better. JRA’s policy agenda or VCN’s fact sheets can help.
 - Remember: a few personalized messages can be more impactful than multiple pre-written form letters.
 - Leave your contact information so that your representative or their staff can follow up.
- Afterwards
 - Let JRA know if you get a response and what you may have learned.
 - Follow up after your representative takes action. Thank them for doing the right thing, or urge them to reconsider if they did not make the right choice.

CIVICS 101

How a bill becomes a law: Lawmakers introduce various bills and build support by encouraging their colleagues to join them in cosponsoring. Bills are referred to committees which advance, amend, or block legislation. Bills that pass out of committee go for a full vote by the chamber and, if successful, move to the other chamber to repeat the process. If the same, identical bill passes both chambers, it heads to the executive for signature or veto. If not, negotiators try to settle the differences first.

How tax dollars are spent: The Executive puts forth a budget based on his priorities, projected program costs, and agency needs. The legislature takes that budget under advisement, passes funding legislation, and sends it back to the Executive for signature.

- ❑ In Congress, the Senate and House Appropriations Committees both craft 12 separate bills appropriating funds. These work their way through both chambers, hopefully by the end of July, so that final negotiations can take place in September before the start of the federal fiscal year on October 1st. If time runs out, Congress can pass a resolution that extends funding for a period of time while negotiations continue.
- ❑ In Virginia, the “money committees” (Senate Finance and House Appropriations) start in January with the Governor’s Biennial Budget bill, amending it as they see fit. Both chambers pass their own version of the budget bill in February before choosing a small group of lawmakers to negotiate the differences. Both chambers need to agree on one, identical compromise bill before sending it back to the Governor in March.

How agency decisions are made: Agency actions include things like new regulations, permits for monitored activities, and enforcement. Typically, federal and state laws require agencies to give advance notice of particular actions, publicize the proposed action, provide multiple opportunities for public comment, and respond to comments they have received.