

2011

# Virginia Environmental Attitudes Survey

BALANCING ENVIRONMENTAL AND  
ECONOMIC POLICY

CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT UNIVERSITY'S  
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Virginia  
Environmental  
Endowment

# INTRODUCTION

This is the third of three planned statewide surveys on the public's perceptions of the natural environment in Virginia. The first study in 2009 focused on climate change and examined Virginians' knowledge about it, their personal environmental behavior, and their views on public policy related to climate change. The second study focused on economic approaches to dealing with the environment and climate change as well as assessing the health of Virginia's natural environment and evaluating the most important natural resources in Virginia.

This third study focuses on personal environmental behavior and the relationship between environmental policy

and economic policy. This study reinforces the findings of the two previous studies. Virginians value highly the Commonwealth's natural environment and report behaving consciously in many ways that are good for the natural environment such as by recycling and using energy efficient light bulbs.

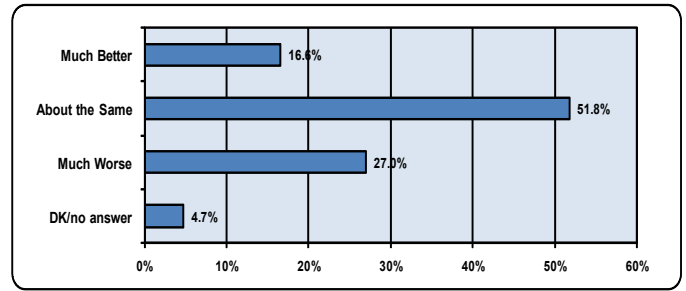
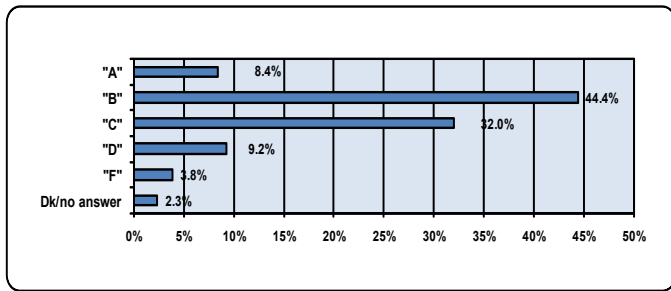
Yet, Virginians also view the relationship between the economy and the natural environment more symbiotically than popular debate often reflects, seeing environmental protection as good for business and reporting a willingness to give their business to environmentally conscious companies.

## THE HEALTH OF VIRGINIA'S NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

In 2010 Virginians gave the state's natural environment an average grade of 2.4 (or "C") on a scale from 1 to 5. In 2011 the average grade increased slightly to 2.5 (See Figure 1). A little more than eight percent of Virginians give the natural environment a grade of "A", while nearly 45% give it a grade of

"B." About 13% give it a grade of "D" or "F." What will the state's natural environment look like in ten years? Just over half of Virginians think it will be about the same as it is now (See Figure 2). Nearly three in ten say it will be much worse while just under two in ten say it will be much better than it is now.

FIGURES 1 & 2: ASSESSMENT OF VIRGINIA'S NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

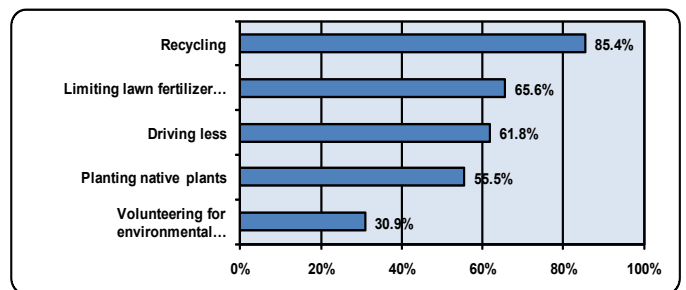
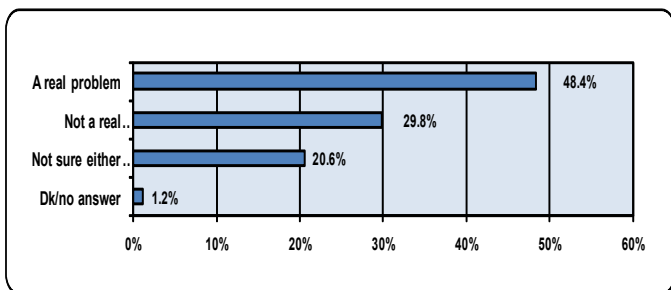


## VIRGINIAN'S PERSONAL ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOR

While the vast majority of climate scientists and other experts say the evidence is unmistakable, within public discourse a debate continues about whether climate change is a real problem. Virginians are divided on the question, with half saying it is a real problem, nearly one in three saying it is not a real problem, and two in ten saying they are not sure either way (See Figure 3).

Yet, despite their skepticism on the question of climate change, Virginians report environmental behaviors that are generally good for the natural environment - especially if these behaviors are easily incorporated into everyday life such as recycling, limiting lawn fertilizers, and driving less. Fewer Virginians report planting native plants or volunteering for environmental projects (See Figure 4).

FIGURES 3 & 4: VIEWS ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND PERSONAL ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOR



# ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC POLICY

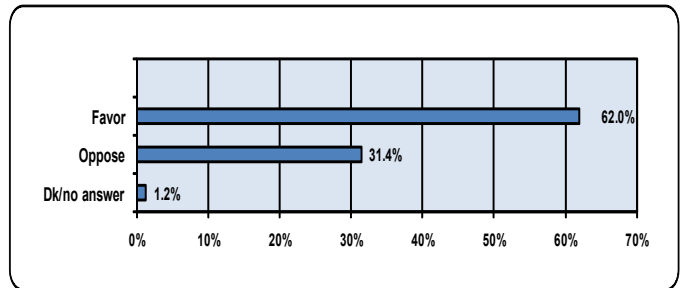
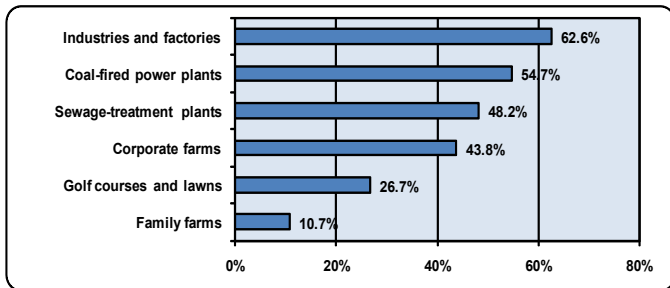
Virginians see industrial factories and coal-fired power plants as very harmful sources of pollution to Commonwealth's waterways and the Chesapeake Bay, while smaller family farms and golf courses and lawns are seen as less harmful sources of pollution (See Figure 5). By a strong majority, the public supports efforts to clean up the Chesapeake Bay, even if it means paying higher fees to do so (See Figure 6).

An on-going public debate in Virginia and nationally centers on the relationship between environmental protection and economic growth and development. Virginians show less doctrinaire and more practical attitudes about this relationship and do not appear to view environmental protection and economic growth as polar opposites. For instance, nearly six in ten Virginians see environmental protection as generally good

for the economy while only two in ten view it as generally bad for the economy. At the same time, Virginians want to protect the environment as much as possible. When asked to make a choice between protecting the environment at the risk of curbing economic growth or giving economic growth priority at the risk of hurting the environment, nearly half of Virginians would rather protect the environment, while a third would rather give a priority to economic growth.

Finally, when it comes to their own pocket books, Virginians are willing to pay more to support companies with records of environmentally conscious behavior. All things being equal, nearly eight in ten Virginians are more likely to purchase from such a company, and just over half would purchase there even if prices were higher at that company.

FIGURES 5 & 6: HARMFUL SOURCES OF POLLUTION AND SUPPORT FOR PLAN TO CLEAN CHESAPEAKE BAY



## CONCLUSION

Taken as a whole, this report reflects a public with tempered views. While Virginians generally value the state's natural environment they think it could be improved. Yet they do not expect it to improve much in the next decade. While they are conflicted on whether climate change is real or not, they report behaviors that are in many respects good for the natural

environment such as recycling, driving less, and limiting the use of lawn fertilizers. They also view the relationship between environmental protection and economic growth in more complimentary ways than in conflictual ways. Yet, when pressed they favor environmental protection over economic growth and development.

In your view is environmental protection generally [choices randomized: "bad for the economy" or "generally good for the economy"], or do you think it makes no difference?

18.2% Bad 56.9% Good 19.8% Makes no difference 11.4% Unsure/DK/no answer

I'm going to read two statements about the environment and the economy and I want you to tell me which one comes closest to your view. [statements randomized: "Protection of the environment should be given priority, even at the risk of curbing economic growth" or "Economic growth should be given priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent"].

48.3% Environment 33.6% Economic Growth 14.6% Equal/both 3.5% Unsure/DK/no answer

Let's say you needed to purchase a product or service and you had a choice between two well-known companies who are offering it at the same price, but you know one of the companies has a record of attempting to be environmentally conscious. Are you [statements randomized: "more" or "less"] likely to purchase from the company that attempts to be environmentally conscious, or does it make no difference to you?

81.1% More 6.1% Less 11.7% Makes no difference 1.2% Unsure/DK/no answer

Ok, now let's say you are in that same situation - you need to purchase a product or service and you have a choice between two well-known companies, but the product or service sold by the company that has a record of attempting to be environmentally conscious is 5% higher than the other company. Are you [statements randomized: "more" or "less"] likely to purchase from the company that attempts to be environmentally conscious, or does it make no difference to you?

53.3% More 20.3% Less 22.3% Makes no difference 4.2% Unsure/DK/no answer



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## Methodology

The 2011 Virginia Environmental Attitudes Survey is a public opinion survey of 719 (585 landline and 134 cell phone numbers) randomly selected registered Virginia voters conducted between March 31 and April 11, 2011. The data reported here are weighted on sex, age, race, and region of residence to reflect as closely as possible the demographic composition of all Virginia adults 18 and older. Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. Results for the full sample have a margin of error of plus or minus 3.7% at the 95% level of confidence. This means for the full sample we can be 95% confident that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 3.7%. In addition to sampling error, the other potential sources of error include non-response, question wording, and interviewer error. Where percentages for subgroups are reported, the margin of error would be higher. The poll was designed by Quentin Kidd of the Wason Center for Public Policy at CNU and conducted by the Institute of Public Opinion at Muhlenberg College. For further information or requests call (757) 594-8033 or e-mail [qkidd@cnu.edu](mailto:qkidd@cnu.edu). Full topline can be found at <http://cpp.cnu.edu>. Funding for the VEAS is provided in part by a grant from the Virginia Environmental Endowment.