Clean Water Advocates: Pilot Version

Fall 2023

Overview

Wild Virginia seeks to establish an education program to train a small group (6-8 persons) of dedicated volunteers (“Advocates”) to support Wild Virginia’s efforts to protect Virginia’s water quality. Specifically, Wild Virginia aims to equip these volunteers with fundamental knowledge of federal and state water protection laws, regulatory processes, and basic advocacy skills in order to influence environmental decisions and outcomes.

Additionally, Wild Virginia aims to develop a diverse, equitable, and inclusive education program that welcomes individuals from all backgrounds and experiences. Wild Virginia is able to offer need-based travel stipends for qualifying Advocates to attend the in-person celebratory gathering to be held at the end of training.

This is the pilot version of the Clean Water Advocates program. Wild Virginia seeks to continue and expand the program in the future. As such, throughout this pilot, Wild Virginia will seek feedback from program participants to inform program development.

Advocates Essential Tasks

Wild Virginia desires for Advocates to take on the following tasks in order to support the organization’s water protection efforts:

- Reviewing regulatory/technical documents;
- Writing and submitting public comments;
- Writing letters to local representatives and public officials;
- Writing letters to the editor;
- Participating in public hearings, citizen board meetings; and
- Helping recruit others to be Clean Water Advocates
About the Program

Duration

9 weeks; total of 2 hours per week (1 hour virtual training; 1 hour “homework”). 8 weeks will be training, 1 week will be an in-person celebration

Presentation

The training program will be virtual (excluding the final celebration) and all courses will take place online. Courses will take place in the evening (7pm-8pm for most classes, however 7pm-9pm for the classes on the Clean Water Act and Virginia's Water Permits) once per week. Lessons will include a mix of lecture, guest speaker, and student participation such as group discussions and class activities. Additionally, Wild Virginia will offer drop-in virtual office hours each week during the lunch hour (12pm-1pm). Office hours will also be available Monday-Friday by appointment.

Content

Essential Knowledge Courses

● The Clean Water Act & Protecting Clean Water in the Commonwealth
  ○ Learning Objectives: At the end of this course, Advocates will be able to:
    ■ Summarize generally federal and state approaches to protecting surface water quality in the United States;
    ■ Explain the relationship between the federal government and the state government in achieving water quality goals;
    ■ Define key acronyms (WQS, NPDES, TMDL) and describe generally the purpose and function of each program.

● Virginia Water Protection Program (VWPP) & Virginia Pollution Discharge Elimination System (VPDES) Permit Programs
  ○ Learning Objectives: At the end of this course, Advocates will be able to:
    ■ Summarize the relationship of Virginia's water permit programs to the Commonwealth's Clean Water Act responsibilities;
    ■ Explain the purposes, function, and stages of each permit program;
    ■ Explain the contents of a permit.
Dealing with Agencies & Agency Action

○ Learning Objectives: At the end of this course, Advocates will be able to:
  ■ Name the state agencies responsible for protecting water quality;
  ■ Summarize the administrative process for approving water permits;
  ■ Explain opportunities for public engagement in such processes;
  ■ Understand the importance of the public notice and comment process for environmental advocacy.

Water Resources & Environmental Justice

○ Learning Objectives: At the end of this course, Advocates will be able to:
  ■ Define environmental justice and the goals of just environmental decision-making;
  ■ Understand the political, economic, and social structures that create unequal access to the environmental decision-making process for certain communities, often due to community members’ race, color, national origin, or income;
  ■ Understand that certain communities do not receive the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards;
  ■ Summarize the perspective on water resources of Virginia's indigenous communities and their ecological knowledge.

Essential Skills Courses

● FOIA & Regulatory Action Tracking
  ○ Learning Objectives: At the end of this course, Advocates will be able to:
    ■ Summarize the purpose of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and how to use it in environmental advocacy;
    ■ Draft a FOIA request;
    ■ Find and follow regulatory actions (e.g. Townhall, Regulations.gov).

● Public Comments
  ○ Learning Objectives: At the end of this course, Advocates will be able to:
    ■ Summarize the characteristics of effective comment and ineffective comment;
Gather information and evidence to support their comment;
- Write an effective public comment.

Explaining Environmental Issues: Elevator Pitches, Letter Writing & Lobbying
- Learning Objectives: At the end of this course, Advocates will be able to:
  - Write a letter to a legislative representative;
  - Write a letter to the editor;
  - Craft an “elevator pitch” that clearly and concisely explains an environmental issue to an unfamiliar audience
  - Understand how to connect with elected representatives, including scheduling personal lobbying meetings

Using Scientific Data in Advocacy
- Learning Objectives: At the end of this course, Advocates will be able to:
  - Explain the use of scientific data to support advocacy efforts;
  - Read and review technical documents about such topics as water quality, water pollution, and aquatic organisms.

Assessment
- Pre-Assessment: Prior to the beginning of the program, Advocates will complete an intro questionnaire on the course content in order for Wild Virginia to determine what knowledge and skills cohort already possesses coming in and to adjust course lectures and activities accordingly
- Check-Your-Understanding quizzes following each class
  - Multiple choice and short answer
  - No more than 15 minutes; included in Homework hour
- Final Quiz following last class
  - Multiple choice and short answer
  - No more than 20 minutes; included in final Homework hour
  - Reuse questions from Check-Your-Understanding quizzes

Completion of Training & Celebration
- Advocates will receive a certificate upon completion of training program
• Post-training Celebration: Final “class” will consist of a casual picnic gathering of Wild Virginia staff and Advocates at a local park. There, Advocates will receive their certificates, as well as have the opportunity to connect in-person with fellow Advocates and Wild Virginia. Scholarships for travel will be made available as long as funding exists.

• Wild Virginia will ask Advocates to complete an Anonymous Feedback Survey about the training program to inform program revisions

Advocate Recruitment & Retention

• Recruitment by application to assess fit
  ○ Targeted effort to reach out to diverse communities about program opportunity;

• Request selected applicants sign a Commitment Agreement stating that they will fully participate in the program by attending trainings, completing assessments, engaging with “homework,” and coming to the in-person celebratory gathering

• Require 5 hours of volunteering on clean water issues per month to maintain Advocate status

• Include Advocates names and short bios on Wild Virginia website and in social media

Post-Training Support from Wild Virginia Pre-Hiring of Coordinator

• Send follow-up emails after every training class;
• Send monthly email with action alerts (and reminder for monthly call);
• Host monthly calls (lunchtime option and evening option) with Advocates to discuss advocacy priorities, upcoming engagement opportunities, and address concerns/questions;
• Track Advocates volunteer hours (Google form)
• Encourage Advocates to connect with each other via email, social media, in-person events