

VWEA Fly-In 2026: Advocacy in Action for Virginia's Water/Wastewater Sector

Submitted by VWEA Fly-In Team

This was the second year that members of the Virginia Water Environment Association (VWEA) traveled to Washington, DC, to participate in the National Water Policy Fly-In. The Fly-In is an opportunity to engage directly with federal lawmakers and advocate for the policies, funding, and regulatory clarity needed to support clean and reliable wastewater infrastructure in Virginia.

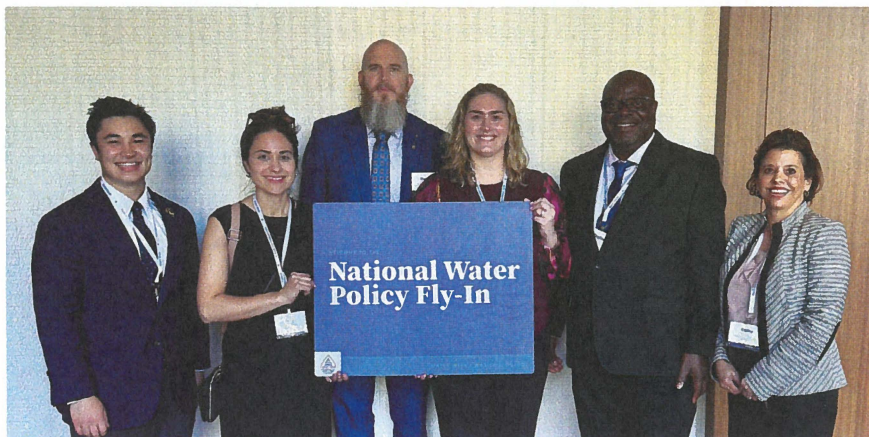
Last year, we had a delegation of five individuals from the VWEA Public and Government Affairs Committee (PGAC). This year's delegation doubled in size and represented a diverse cross-section of VWEA membership, including utility members, consulting engineers, sales engineers, and young professionals. Together, our group brought firsthand experience and technical expertise to conversations with Virginia's congressmen and congresswomen, as well as our two senators.

This year's VWEA team included:

- Kathy Rabalais, VWEA Executive Director
- Bryce Combs, VWEA President and Professional Engineer for Combs and Associates Inc.
- Ryan Hendrix, VWEA Past President and Executive Director of Pepper's Ferry Regional Wastewater Treatment Authority
- Elizabeth Barbour, PGAC Chair and Outreach Specialist for Fairfax County's Wastewater Management Program
- Jordan Combs, PGAC Vice Chair and Executive Director of Maury Service Authority
- Lara Grotz, Principal Engineer at Hazen and Sawyer
- Chris Tabor, Vice President at Hazen and Sawyer
- Jamie Mitchell, Chief of Water Quality for HRSD
- Jack Tigani, Civil Engineering Student at



Members of the VWEA Fly-In Team. Pictured left to right: Ryan Hendrix, Elizabeth Barbour, Kathy Rabalais, Charles Egharevba, and Jamie Mitchell



Members of the VWEA Fly-In Team. Pictured left to right: Jack Tigani, Lara Grotz, Ryan Hendrix, Charles Egharevba, and Kathy Rabalais

George Mason University and part-time employee with Fairfax County

- Charles Egharevba, Water Reclamation Operations Manager for Prince William Water
- David Hill, Project Manager for Black & Veatch

The 2026 Fly-In centered around several key policy areas of critical importance to Virginia's water sector. These topics reflected both national priorities and local challenges faced by utilities across the Commonwealth:

- **PFAS Liability Protection:** Requested support for H.R. 1267, the Water Systems PFAS Liability Protection Act. Public water and wastewater utilities are required to treat and manage PFAS despite not being the producers of these chemicals. Without a liability shield under CERCLA, the financial burden of cleanup risks being shifted from polluters to local ratepayers. CERCLA should uphold the "Polluter Pays" principle, not the "Ratepayer Pays" principle.
- **Water Infrastructure Resilience and Cybersecurity:** We discussed the importance of supporting H.R. 5566, the *Water Infrastructure Resilience and Sustainability Act*, which strengthens the ability of utilities to withstand natural disasters, extreme weather, and growing cybersecurity threats. Targeted federal investment is essential to ensure reliable service, rapid recovery from disruptions, and the protection of critical infrastructure.
- **Water Affordability:** Requested support for H.R. 4733, the Low-Income Household Water

Assistance Program (LIHWAP) Establishment Act. This legislation would provide federal grants to states to help working families afford safe drinking water and wastewater services. As communities face rising infrastructure costs, LIHWAP is vital to ensuring equitable access to clean and affordable water.

- **Water Reuse and Sustainable Growth:** We highlighted the need for forward-looking water management policies, including support for H.R. 2940, the *Advancing Water Reuse Act*. With the rapid expansion of data centers, particularly in Northern Virginia, federal incentives for onsite water recycling systems can reduce pressure on local water supplies while supporting economic growth.
- **Proper Disposal and Labeling of Wipes:** We thanked the Virginia Congressional Delegation for their support in being part of the unanimous congressional consent for the passage of H.R. 2269, the *Wastewater Infrastructure Pollution Prevention and Environmental Safety Act* (WIPPES). By enforcing proper labeling and correct disposal techniques, this legislation will help mitigate the negative environmental impacts that wipes currently pose.
- **Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF):** Finally, we underscored the importance of robust and sustained funding for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund. This program remains one of the most effective tools for addressing aging infrastructure, supporting local jobs, and safeguarding water quality across Virginia and the nation.



Members of the VWEA Fly-In Team. Featured in picture: Ryan Hendrix, Elizabeth Barbour, Charles Egharevba, Kathy Rabalais, Jordan Combs, Lara Grotz, Chris Tabor, and Jack Tigani



VWEA Team prepping before meeting. Featured in picture: Ryan Hendrix, Elizabeth Barbour, Charles Egharevba, Bryce Carter, Jamie Mitchell, Lara Grotz, Chris Tabor, and Jack Tigani

Several important takeaways emerged from the 2026 Fly-In:

1. **Advocacy Is Ongoing:** We met with a handful of representatives whom we met last year. The legislative aides reminded us that they do remember faces and names when we continue showing up year after year. The Fly-In is one component of a broader advocacy effort. They recommended that we maintain communication with them primarily via email throughout the year, updating them on bills we are following and letting them know if we will be applying for Community Project Funding (CPF) or Congressionally Directed Spending (CDS).

2. **Water Challenges Are Interconnected:**

From PFAS to cybersecurity, affordability, reuse, and infrastructure funding, it is clear that policy solutions must address water quality, reliability, equity, and economic development together, not in isolation. Altogether, these issues form a system: decisions in one area, such as contaminant regulation or infrastructure funding, ripple across affordability, resilience, and economic growth. The Fly-In makes it possible to explain these connections directly to policymakers so they understand that water policy cannot be made in silos.

3. **Professional Engagement Drives Change:**

Utility professionals and water sector leaders translate technical issues into real-world impacts for lawmakers, providing trusted, nonpartisan expertise rooted in on-the-ground experience. By sharing information and community stories from across Virginia, they help ensure that federal policies are practical, equitable, and aligned with local needs. Sustained engagement builds relationships and continuity, keeping water issues visible among competing priorities and helping shape legislation and funding decisions that support resilient, affordable, and sustainable water systems. [@](#)

Participants in the 2026 Fly-In shared their perspectives on the experience and its impact:

"This experience reinforced for me how important public input is for our legislators. As engineers, we design infrastructure that directly impacts communities, and those communities have a voice in how projects are perceived and implemented. Our members of Congress often hear about these projects from their constituents, so it was valuable to provide technical insight on major water infrastructure efforts across Virginia, such as water use and data centers."

— Lara Grotz

"I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity to attend this year's National Water Policy Fly-In. It was a truly transformative experience that highlighted just how critical it is to advocate for water issues not only in Virginia, but across the entire country. This event underscored the power of collective action and reinforced my commitment to ensuring a sustainable, resilient, and equitable water future for communities."

— Elizabeth Barbour

"Participating as part of a larger VWEA team amplified the shared interests of Virginia's wastewater utilities and provided Virginia context for the national conversation. I felt that the legislators greatly appreciated learning about the connections between proposed legislation and the experiences of their constituents. Any opportunity to engage with legislators and remind them of the critical service we provide as anchor institutions within our communities is certainly worth the investment of our time."

— Jamie Mitchell

"Attending the National Water Policy Fly-In gave me a new perspective on how policy connects to the work happening across the water industry every day. I was surprised by how conversational and collaborative the meetings were, with discussions focused on sharing real experiences rather than formal presentations. As a student attending for the first time, it was a valuable experience seeing how advocacy in our industry can simply start with honest conversations about the work we do and the communities we serve."

— Jack Tigani

"The National Water Policy Fly-In has become one of my favorite events, and I was very grateful to once again attend and represent Virginia and VWEA. To witness and be part of the committee's efforts to grow our fledgling team from last year into a full-force delegation representing all but two of Virginia's districts has been amazing and very rewarding!"

— Ryan Hendrix