

Scenic Rivers Background

The Virginia Scenic Rivers Program was established in 1970 as a way to celebrate outstanding examples of Virginia's rivers. The program is managed by the state in partnership with citizens and the local government and focuses on enhancing the conservation of scenic rivers and their corridors. Recognized for their scenic, recreational, historic and natural characteristics, rivers and streams that gain this designation are honored by community groups, localities, DCR and Virginia's General Assembly as being Virginia's finest.

Scenic river designations result from partnerships between local groups, local governments, state agencies and the Virginia General Assembly. The Virginia Scenic River Board was created to promote and enhance the program. The advisory board is made up of 15 governor-appointed citizens including riparian landowners and other concerned citizens from throughout Virginia. The board discusses river issues and makes recommendations on the stewardship of existing scenic rivers and expansion of the program with other eligible river segments.

In order to gain this designation, local residents and state representatives evaluate rivers according to program criteria to determine whether or not river segments are worthy. This is done only after each locality adjacent to the river segment requests the study. Once the river is found worthy, the locality must then have its local legislators present a bill to the General Assembly, which then passes a resolution adopting the river into the system of scenic rivers. Twenty-four river segments now belong to this prestigious group.

Designation Evaluation Criteria

Each river or river segment is evaluated using 13 factors or criteria. These were established to provide a uniform gauge by which all waterways are measured. The evaluation criteria are:

- Streambed and stream flow modifications.
- Human development of visual corridor.
- Historic features.
- Landscape.
- Quality of fishery.
- Rare, threatened or endangered species.
- Water quality.
- Parallel roads.
- Crossings.
- Special features affecting aesthetics.
- Recreational access.
- Land conservation.

Benefits of Designation

The Virginia Scenic Rivers Program protects scenic rivers and streams and provides an opportunity to consider scenic and other resources in planning and design. The program encourages the protection of rivers with scenic, recreational, historic and natural characteristics. If locally adopted, the properties along designated scenic rivers may be eligible to get a special tax assessment to reduce the tax liability.

- Designation encourages protection and preservation of the river.
- Designation declares the protection of a river's scenic values to be a beneficial purpose in developing water resource policies.
- Designation requires appointment of an administering agency, usually the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR).
- Designation requires the Virginia Scenic Rivers Advisory Board, whose members are appointed by the governor, to advise the director of DCR on federal, state or local plans that impact the designated river segment and to give local citizens a voice in river-related issues.
- After designation, the General Assembly must approve construction of any dam that would result in an impediment to the natural flow of the river.
- The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) recognizes Virginia's designated Scenic River System. This ensures that the designated river's qualities are considered during licensing or relicensing of federal projects there.

Scenic River Designation Does Not:

- Give the state control over land use.
- Give the public any right to use privately owned land.
- Enable commercial promotion of Virginia's scenic rivers.