

Smart Harbors



Summer 2026

Updates From Virginia Institute of Marine Science

CMP Best Management Practice of the Quarter: Distribute Virginia Clean Boater Program Information

This quarter's Best Management Practice (BMP) is to distribute [Virginia Clean Boater](#) information. The easiest way to meet this BMP is to display [Clean Boater Guides](#) at your kiosk, bulletin board, or front desk. Boaters can take the pledge to minimize their impact on the water.

Why become a Virginia Clean Boater?

By adopting pollution prevention measures, Virginia Clean Boaters can take satisfaction in knowing they are doing their part to keep Virginia waterways clean, preserve our waterways for the future, and learn/teach clean boating habits. For more information, visit our [Clean Boater Guide webpage](#).



Updated VA Clean Marina Recertification Checklists

The updated VA Clean Marina Program recertification checklists have been posted to [our website](#). Next time you recertify, please use the updated version. If you'd like a copy emailed or mailed to you, please email acclark@vims.edu.

CMP Highlighted Marina – James City County Marina

This quarter’s highlighted marina is the James City County Marina, a certified Virginia Clean Marina in Williamsburg, VA, with direct access to the James River via Powhatan Creek, one of Virginia’s most historic tributaries. Recertified in October 2023 through the Virginia Clean Marina Program, the Marina continues to showcase James City County’s commitment to environmental sustainability and clean boating practices.

Reachable by navigating Sandy Bay or the Back River of Jamestown Island, the James City County Marina offers 48 uncovered slips, six floating jet-ski slips, land dry storage, a day-use dock and transient rental spaces. The recently renovated floating docks have 20 or 30-Amp electrical and water service for slip holders. Offering public access, the Marina has convenient amenities, including non-ethanol fuel service, pump-out service, 24-hour boat ramp access, and more, as well as a marine service center and brewery on site, making it a must-visit destination for many locals and visitors.

The James City County Marina staff are always present during fueling and pump-out operations to prioritize safety and enforce environmental controls to support a sustainable ecosystem in the immediate area. The Marina’s fuel and pump-out systems are serviced regularly to maintain stormwater management practices. James City County is committed to promoting clean boating practices and environmental conservation.

With access to destinations such as Smithfield Station, Surry Seafood Company, Newport News, and Richmond, the James City County Marina provides a welcoming home port for both locals and visiting boaters exploring Virginia’s waters. For more information, visit the [James City County Marina website](#) or call 757-565-3699.



Industry News

The Nansemond River in Suffolk is finally getting cleaner

From Katherine Hafner, WHRO, May 4, 2026

The latest State of the River report has some good news — but there’s still a long way to go.

Sitting on a bench by the fishing pier at Sleepy Hole Park in Suffolk, Beth Cross gestured to a swath of the Nansemond River.

“If you're looking to the left, that was condemned waters. And to the right is more of the tidal flow and not-condemned waters pushing down towards the lower river,” said Cross, director of the nonprofit Nansemond River Preservation Alliance.

“So we can literally see the acres that have been released from condemned status right from the park. It's pretty exciting.”

The Virginia Department of Health recently reopened about 600 acres of this section of the Nansemond for harvesting shellfish.

The change is the highlight of the nonprofit's [newest State of the River report](#), which is conducted every two years. It's also the biggest piece of good news in more than a decade.

For a while, conditions seemed stagnant, Cross said.

“I felt like we were reporting the same things: that over 50% of the river was condemned, that it might look like that forever and this is what we could do if we want a healthier river.”

Last summer, state and local data started showing a drop in fecal bacteria in a middle section of the river, leading to the 600-acre reopening.

But there's a long way to go – and conditions are always subject to change, Cross said.

The Nansemond River stretches 23 miles from downtown Suffolk to the confluence of the James River and Chesapeake Bay.

Officials categorize the river's sections as lower, middle and upper.

The lower, or northern, end tends to be the cleanest, because its waters are mixed with water coming in from the bay, a process known as flushing that helps cleanse contaminants.

But the uppermost section, stretching from about the Nansemond National Wildlife Refuge south to Constant's Wharf, doesn't have a natural flushing system, Cross said.

The river's headwaters were dammed off in the mid to late 20th century to serve as water reservoirs for Norfolk and Portsmouth, such as Lakes Meade and Cahoon.

Losing that flow of freshwater makes the upper branches tough to restore. But bacteria are decreasing there, too.

The data challenges the nonprofit's assumptions about the linear impacts of human development, Cross said. The river appears to be improving even while development continues.

That could reflect better sewage and septic systems, or homeowners and community groups taking action, such as planting oysters and native plant gardens.

The city also last year [launched an Environmental Crimes Task Force](#) to crack down on harmful actions such as illegal dumping.

Cross said storms could easily reverse the river's condemned status, because heavy rains quickly wash pollution into the water.

"We are realistic" about the challenges, she said. But "we get to be part of a generation that is restoring something for years to come."

'Floating wetlands' are now blooming at the Norfolk Botanical Garden

From Katherine Hafner, WHRO, May 27, 2026

The islands full of native plant species are meant to support wildlife and educate visitors to the garden.

The freshwater NATO Pond near the center of the Norfolk Botanical Garden is often a hotspot for wildlife.

Visitors spy herons stopping by, turtles bobbing in the water and even the occasional otter from the surrounding Lake Whitehurst.

Garden officials hope three new "floating wetlands" will attract more wildlife – and the attention of guests.

"I wanted to help the public understand plants aren't just beautiful things, but they are functional, essential things, and we can use them in our habitats," said Alex Cantwell, the Botanical Garden's senior director of adult education and conservation.

The project, called Floating Futures, was launched with a \$20,000 grant from the Hampton Roads Community Foundation.

Garden officials worked with students from Virginia Beach Schools' Environmental Studies Program to construct the wetlands.

Each kidney bean-shaped island is a few feet long, made of a dense, spongy material including recycled plastics and topped with a layer of coconut coir and river stones, Cantwell said. They're then anchored underwater.

The wetlands went up in November and are "just starting to wake up," she said.

"I think with all this warm weather headed our way, they're going to really start to take off. It's going to be purples, reds, pinks and some yellows in there."

The native species include blue mistflower, soft rush, swamp milkweed, swamp sunflower, hibiscus and cardinal flower.

The mix of plants provides nectar, pollen and seeds for a range of animals, including monarch butterflies. Turtles like to bask in the sun on top.

"We've got a really lush habitat that will form above the water, but it also will create habitat beneath the surface of the island," Cantwell said. "Deep roots will grow through the island and into the water."

Those roots will add oxygen to the water, filter pollutants and cool the water for marine life during hotter weather, she said.

Staff and students plan to survey species in the pond as the project progresses.

Visitors can also help. On the balcony of the NATO Tower, which sits next to the pond, officials set up a photo station where people can snap a shot of the area and upload it to a website called Chronolog, which [compiles them into a timelapse](#) showing the progression of the site.

Cantwell said the Botanical Garden has already received some inquiries from people asking how to replicate the mini-wetlands in their neighborhoods, which she considers a success.

Officials plan to add two islands to the pond with a new group of students later this year. In the meantime, they're trying to fend off hungry geese.

Please Share Your News!

If you have any news that you would like included in the Clean Marina Newsletter, *Smart Harbors*, please let us know! This is a quarterly newsletter with the next issue scheduled for Fall 2026 and we would like to include information from the marina community. If you have comments or questions, please email the Virginia Clean Marina Program: askVCM@vims.edu or acclark@vims.edu or call (804) 684-7768.

