

Youngkin's quiet water legacy is now a national wake-up call.



By. Leslie Jarvis, Jan. 10, 2026

As Gov. Glenn Youngkin prepares to leave office, Virginians will hear familiar summaries of his tenure: tax policy, education battles and partisan clashes that dominated headlines. Far less attention has been paid to one of the most consequential and enduring actions completed during his administration — the creation of a lawful, statewide framework recognizing harvested rainwater as a regulated water supply.

That achievement now carries new weight. Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears; House Speaker Don Scott Jr., D-Portsmouth; and Sen. Louise Lucas, D-Portsmouth, applauded as Gov. Glenn Youngkin gave the State of the Commonwealth address last January. One of the most consequential and enduring actions completed during his administration was the creation of a lawful, statewide framework recognizing harvested rainwater as a regulated water supply, argues Leslie Jarvis.

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality's newly released Annual Water Resources Report shows that groundwater withdrawals rose 7.72% in 2024 compared to the five-year average. In a commonwealth with long-documented groundwater stress in its eastern basin and rapidly growing industrial demand, which is not a neutral statistic. It is a warning.

What makes this moment striking is that the warning came before the data did.

Through conversations with public health officials, concerns about rising groundwater pressure were already circulating last fall. Those concerns were serious enough that Sen. Scott Surovell requested a presentation on rainwater harvesting and proposed legislation before the [State Water Commission on Nov. 19](#) — weeks before the DEQ report became public. Policymakers were being alerted in advance. The data now confirms it.

Water is not an abstract environmental issue. It is a finite resource underpinning public health, economic growth and national security. Yet for more than a century, American water law has focused on reallocating existing supplies rather than expanding them. Virginia quietly chose a different path.

The work began in 2018 with [House Bill 192](#), which directed state agencies to develop rainwater harvesting regulations after early adopters encountered conflicts with local codes in the absence of statewide standards. That process took years of technical review, public health analysis and stakeholder engagement. It culminated in late 2024, when the Virginia Department of Health finalized [Rainwater Harvesting System Regulations](#) establishing enforceable health standards for both potable and non-potable use.

Those regulations were not symbolic. They created certainty where confusion once reigned and opened the door for decentralized water systems that protect public health while reducing strain on aging infrastructure. In 2025, the General Assembly reinforced the framework by passing [Senate Bill 851](#), ensuring that owners of state-compliant systems could not be penalized or forced into municipal hookups simply for choosing a lawful alternative water source.

Together, these actions did something rare in modern water policy. They did not just conserve. They created new supply.

That distinction matters, especially now. Virginia sits at the center of the nation's data center economy, where water-intensive cooling demands are rising rapidly. Much of that water use is hidden inside community water system totals, making the true impact difficult to see until aquifers are already stressed. By the time shortages are visible, the damage is done.

Virginia's framework offers a different model: allow on-site capture and treatment under strict health oversight rather than relying exclusively on centralized systems that were never designed for today's growth. It is a conservative, property-based approach that uses private investment to reduce public strain.

With policymakers such as Sen. Richard Stuart publicly identifying water supply as a priority for the 2026 General Assembly, Virginia cannot afford to debate whether solutions are needed — only which tools it will deploy.

Critically, this framework does not weaken public safeguards. It strengthens them. By bringing [rainwater systems](#) into the regulatory fold, Virginia ensured oversight, accountability, and water quality protection that did not exist when such systems operated in legal gray areas.

The timing now could not be more consequential. The 2026 legislative filing deadline is days away. The DEQ data is now public. Policymakers already knew the pressure was coming. The tools are already on the books.

What remains is whether Virginia will build on its own foresight — or let this moment pass.

Governors are often judged by what makes headlines in the moment. But the true measure of leadership lies in what endures. Virginia's rainwater framework will shape infrastructure decisions, land-use planning and water security for decades.

Leslie Jarvis is the founder of the Society for a Secure and Sustainable Water Future, co-author of Virginia's rainwater harvesting legislation, and a Master of Environmental Studies candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University.