Chapter I

Introduction
Since 1607, when the first settlers set foot on Virginia soil, working waterfronts have been the main portal for commerce in Virginia. From the early colonial years of exporting tobacco to England and importing goods from Europe, the commercial waterfronts in coastal Virginia have become the primary facilities supporting the economy of eastern Virginia. Working waterfronts support most all of Virginia’s:

- Commercial fishing operations - large and small
- Ship and boat building, maintenance and repair operations
- Marine research facilities
- Export and import facilities
- Recreational boating and support
- Marine transportation
- US Navy operations

Working waterfronts play a major role in supporting every aspect of Virginia’s economy. NOAA estimates that the economic impact of working waterfronts on six marine industries (ship building and repair, tourism, marine transportation, living resources, marine construction, and offshore mineral extraction) to be 122,000 employed in these sectors and an $8.5 billion contribution to Virginia’s gross domestic product. These figures do not include military employment and its impact on Virginia’s domestic product. Of the 122,000 marine related jobs, about half are in tourism, a third in shipbuilding and repair and 15% in marine construction. Of the total contribution to Virginia’s gross domestic product by marine activity, shipbuilding and repair total 40%, marine transportation 25% and tourism 20%.

Working waterfronts are defined as areas or structures on, over, or adjacent to navigable bodies of water that provide access to the water and are used for water-dependent commercial, industrial, or government activities, including commercial fishing, recreational fishing, tourism, aquaculture, boat and ship building, boat and ship repair, boat and ship services, seafood processing, seafood sales, transportation, shipping, marine construction, military activities and other water dependent uses.

In addition to their economic impact on Virginia, our working waterfronts have served as a cultural cornerstone supporting the rich heritage of a Chesapeake Bay lifestyle. Working waterfronts are the conduits for translating activity on tidal waters to our settlements on land. Our communities depend upon the vitality of these resources to support not only the economy but also our tidewater lifestyle that is inextricably tied to the water.

Over the years Virginia has seen many transitions in the character and activities that our working waterfronts support. In our colonial times the ports and landings served as our connection to England and the rest of the world. The Revolutionary War battle and surrender of
the British at Yorktown helped create our great nation. The role of Hampton Roads during the Civil War was critical to the unity of our nation and the change from an agrarian to an industrial economy. The numerous steamboat lines and associated wharves and landings served as commercial highways up until the 1950’s when highway bridges and tunnels were constructed crossing our major rivers and the Chesapeake Bay. Today our working waterfronts support a robust ship and boat building, repair and maintenance industry, the largest naval base in the world, one of the most active ports on the east coast, a recovering seafood and aquaculture industry, and a robust tourism industry.

But today, our working waterfronts are under substantial threats and pressures from; rising sea levels, climate change, changing global economic conditions, loss of natural habitat that supports our shellfish and finfish populations, and competition from residential development. Once a working waterfront transitions to an alternative use it very seldom reverts back to a working waterfront. It is critical for the future of the Commonwealth’s economy to have adequate and dispersed working waterfronts throughout coastal Virginia.

This Working Waterfront Master Plan was developed from the bottom up with a series of interviews and discussion with local officials, to statewide workshops with a variety of stakeholder groups, and regional Planning District Commission plans that make up individual chapters of this document. The Master Plan is the culmination of several years of analysis and study of the conditions present at working waterfronts and efforts that have been used to help preserve them. This Master Plan pulls together the common themes of those efforts and recommends a series of policy tools and options that can be implemented at the federal, state, regional and local governmental levels along with actions that land owners and the private sector can take to help ensure that working waterfronts remain vibrant well into the future.