



The Piedmont View

IN THIS ISSUE

PAGE 2 Stewardship at Ovoka Farm



PAGE 3 Summer Fellowship highlights



PAGE 7 Out & About



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The Environmental Footprint of the Digital Age

By Julie Bolthouse, Land Use Director

When we search the internet, send an email, stream music, or use an “app” or social media, we’re working “in the cloud.” But where, and what, exactly, is this cloud? The metaphor has led to a lot of confusion and complacency that threatens the resources we depend upon.

In fact, much of “the cloud” is on the ground right here in Virginia. All the world’s on-demand computing takes place in colossal data center facilities, full of computer servers with very

few people, that use massive amounts of electricity and water. The footprint of these facilities is growing globally, driven in part by today’s soaring demand for artificial intelligence, data harvesting, and cryptocurrency mining. And Virginia is subsidizing billions of dollars in data center development on the backs of its ratepayers, without a full understanding of the long-term ramifications.

The Commonwealth is already home to the largest and fastest-growing data center mar-

ket in the world, housing nearly 50% of all U.S. facilities, and by some estimates, enabling up to 70% of the world’s internet activity. As of this printing, Loudoun boasts over 27 million square feet of data center space, and Prince William claims over 5 million square feet.

However, millions more square footage of data centers are either under construction or approved for development in both counties. The two largest data center campuses ever envisioned, a combined 22 million square feet of data center space, are proposed as part of the Prince William Digital Gateway project, in a rural part of Prince William County, next to Manassas National Battlefield Park. Large data center complexes are also proposed in King George, Stafford, Spotsylvania, Caroline, Culpeper, Orange and Surry counties.

This unchecked data center growth carries an insatiable

demand for massive energy upgrades, extensive acreage, and tremendous water intake, jeopardizing the state’s efforts to meet its climate goals, improve air and water quality, advance land conservation and protect national and state parks.

Energy — Repeatedly, large transmission lines (not the smaller distribution lines usually seen in neighborhoods) have been built through communities, parks, and natural and cultural resources in order to get power to data centers. According to Dominion Energy, newer data center load requests range between 60-90 megawatts per building, which equates to the energy usage of more than 15,000 households at peak demand! These lines are NOT paid for by the data center developer. Rather, their costs are built into the energy tax bills paid by all Virginia ratepayers, and

Continued on page 4



Data centers are increasingly being approved adjacent to residential housing and public green spaces, like this one along the W&OD trail in Ashburn. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Making Biscuit Run Park Available to Everyone

By Peter Krebs, Community Advocacy Manager

When I was a child, I loved the woods behind my house. I played in streams, chased friends through the forest, discovered tiny hidden treasures and acquired a sense of awe within a cathedral of mighty trees. It was a space where I could grow and discover the world around me. Today, we know that playing in nature is linked to many educational and life-long benefits and that people of all ages are healthier and less stressed when they have ready access to trees and open space. That’s why I am so passionate and relentless about promoting everyday access to the outdoors for all and what drives my latest advocacy work with PEC.

My childhood woods were in an area similar to many neighborhoods in and around Charlottesville. What seemed at the time like a realm of infinite possibilities was actually a 15-acre county park — something I believe every child ought to have

access to. So when I joined PEC back in 2017 and Biscuit Run Park was starting to look like a real possibility for Albemarle County, my mission was clear: We had to get it open and connected to as many people as possible.

At 1,190 acres of woodlands and fields, Biscuit Run Park is vast — nearly three times the size of other large county parks. Its landscape has forests, meadows, streams and ponds that will be kept close to their current state. Best of all, it is located next to neighborhoods where thousands of people live, work and go to school. Getting the park open hasn’t been simple, but thanks to the persistence of many people both inside and outside local and state government, we’re almost there. A soft-opening is scheduled for this fall, and the first wave of construction for parking, trails, and maintenance facilities should be substantially complete in spring 2024.

But will it be truly accessible

to all? Will kids be able to run out their doors into that wooded sanctuary the way I did? That’s my next advocacy project with PEC.

Where Equal Access, Environmental Best Practice, and Cost-Savings Intersect

The initial entrance into Biscuit Run Park will be on its eastern extremity, on Virginia Route 20, and only accessible by car. On the park’s western border, the highly eroded Biscuit Run stream channel is extremely difficult to cross, making the park inaccessible by foot for the thousands of people who live nearby. Of particular concern is the Southwood community, the area’s largest concentration of affordable housing and where Habitat for Humanity of Greater Charlottesville is working with residents to create up to 1,000 homes,

many of which will be deeply affordable.

Biscuit Run Park is going to be a magnificent resource, and it wouldn’t be right for people of this community to be able to see the park, but not get to it easily.

The park’s western entrance is planned as a bicycle-pedestrian bridge from a residential area over the stream, accessible to strollers and wheelchairs. But, it wasn’t originally scheduled to open until 2027 — at the soonest. PEC, Habitat for Humanity and other partners have been working to change that by accelerating its construction and a connector trail by several years.

With a grant from the Genan

Continued on page 4



Biscuit Run creek in its current, nearly uncrossable condition. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Stewarding the Land: Restoring Healthy Forests

By Hallie Harriman, Potomac Watershed Field Representative

Whether your property is large or small, conserved or not, you likely have a desire to keep it healthy and cared for. That inclination is called “stewardship,” and it means to look after the landscape with its ecological, scenic, economic, and cultural dimensions in mind. For Karen Way, at Ovoka Farm in Fauquier County, stewardship has involved actively rehabilitating her property’s resources by removing aggressive invasive species, excluding livestock from creeks and streams, and, most recently, completing a timber harvest on the forested area of the property.

Nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains at the western edge of the Virginia Piedmont, Ovoka Farm holds a combination of fertile Piedmont lands, water resources, hardwood forest, and historic significance as a strategic location for both armies during the Civil War. The Piedmont Environmental Council once owned the property and permanently protected it from development with a conservation easement. Way, who maintains a sizable herd of full-blood and F1 Wagyu beef cattle, bought Ovoka from PEC in 2013 and has been diligently stewarding the property ever since.

“My favorite thing about Ovoka will always be the cows, but my favorite non-cow thing is seeing the results of our tireless work to turn Ovoka’s ecosystem into a thriving, healthy, and rejuvenated part of the region. We focused on land, water, and trees ... and implemented rotational grazing, protected riparian buffers by installing fencing and revamping our water systems, and have put into practice other best management practices,” she said.

In summer 2022, Way contacted PEC, which holds the conservation easement on her property, about doing a timber harvest. Communicating with the easement holder is an important first step for anyone who owns or manages conserved properties and is considering activities that could affect protected onsite resources. After reviewing the Ovoka Farm easement, PEC confirmed that a timber harvest was allowable with a few requirements.

The foremost of those was a 10-year forest stewardship management plan (FSMP), which sets forth the

landowner’s goals for the entire property and builds out a schedule of land management activities needed to reach them. Some landowners work with the Virginia Department of Forestry to develop the FSMP, or, as Way did, with a professionally accredited SAF Certified Forester. An evaluation of Ovoka’s forest found it to be composed of mixed hardwoods roughly 80-125 years old. Its tree quality varied from poor to good, with poor to moderate growth rate and vigor. Invasive plants scattered throughout the forest included honeysuckle, tree of heaven, oriental bittersweet, barberry, multiflora rose, wineberry and stiltgrass.

In other words, that beautiful mountainside forest visible to all who pass by and through Ashby Gap on Route 15 and into Clarke County on Route 50 was not in tip-top ecological condition. Ultimately, Way’s FSMP recommended a timber harvest to reach her primary goals of improving forest health and wildlife habitat.

Next, the Virginia Department of Forestry created a pre-harvest plan to minimize the impact of logging activities on soil and water quality. This plan identified the location of roads, loading areas, skid trails, streamside buffers, and other sensitive areas on a map for easy viewing and reference. At Ovoka, trees couldn’t be harvested within 100 feet from the streambanks, and temporary crossings had to be constructed to prevent logging equipment from harming the waterways.

Once that was all done, Way’s forester partnered with a timber crew to implement a sustainable harvest, taking into consideration the long-term wellbeing and regeneration of the forest. In Ovoka’s case, only certain trees were marked for removal, and those left behind exhibited good form, size and genetics. They also varied in age and will contribute to healthy stand regeneration as they grow and act as a shelter for future seedlings and saplings.

The months-long timber harvest at Ovoka Farm closed early this year, and Way looks forward to a healthier and more resilient forest as regrowth begins. But her stewardship doesn’t end there. Her FSMP includes monitoring for insects, disease, and invasive



Karen Way, owner of Ovoka Farms, discusses the timbering plan with the skidder operator, while PEC Field Representative Hallie Harriman looks on. Photo by Hugh Kenny.

species, and recommends that she replant shortleaf pine, a species endemic to the Piedmont region, in the coming years.

On a farm as large as Ovoka, land stewardship can be costly. Many agencies offer cost-share assistance for landowners, and grants are sometimes available depending on the project. At Ovoka, Way was able to offset her project costs by selling wood from the harvested trees.

Way says “every landowner needs a solid land management plan that, at a minimum, addresses a property’s top three issues,” and encourages them to look to available resources for help. “It is our moral obligation to protect, enhance, and enrich our ecosystem as best as we can, but we don’t have to do it alone. You can call on the right resources to guide

you, like those at PEC, which not only is a wealth of knowledge but worked with us and supported our efforts to enhance our lands without eliminating critical grazing areas.”

I invite you to take a moment to think about your own land management goals. What would you like to improve or protect on your property? If you don’t quite know where to start, consider reaching out to your local Soil and Water Conservation District, the Virginia Department of Forestry, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Virginia Cooperative Extension offices, or PEC. These groups are a wealth of knowledge and technical resources and will get you off on the right foot to steward your piece of the Piedmont!

Pop Quiz

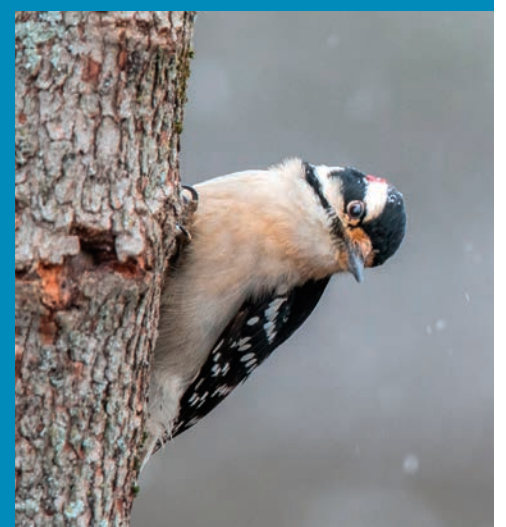
QUESTION

How are Virginia’s woodpeckers able to peck a surface with a g-force equivalent of roughly 250 mph without damage to its brain?

ANSWER

It’s a trick question, with no clear-cut answer!

Woodpeckers can peck as many as 20-25 times per second with a gravitational force of 1,200-1,400 — well beyond the concussion-causing g-force of 90-100 in humans. How these Picadaes repeatedly slam their heads into trees without causing serious brain injury has long fascinated birders and scientists alike.



A downy woodpecker in snow. Photo by October Greenfield

The long-standing belief has been that woodpecker brains are tightly packed inside their skulls, which are a spongy matrix of bones and spaces that compress and expand to withstand the force, and that their unique tongue arrangement acts as a harness around their brains. But a new study in 2022 suggests that their head and beak act in unison, striking and stopping at the precisely the same time, thus negating the need for shock absorption at all. Conversely, when a football player rams into an opponent, their head comes to a stop while their brain inside continues forward, compressing in the front and stretching in the back. And yet another theory is that the relative small size and weight of the woodpecker brain can simply take far more force without damage than the human brain can.

Scientists have been studying avian physiology for decades, and continue to make new, fascinating discoveries about our feathered friends!

Ovoka Farms landowner Karen Way, left, and PEC Field Representative Hallie Harriman, right. Photo by Hugh Kenny



2023 Summer Fellowship Program Highlights

PEC's eight-week Summer Fellowship Program engages 12 college students and graduates in classroom discussions, field trips, and hands-on activities designed to impart practical knowledge and skills for careers in conservation, urban planning, agriculture, historic preservation, public policy, and other related fields.

This year, our fellows enjoyed three weeks here with us and five weeks of virtual learning from their homes in Virginia, Maryland, New York and Illinois. Their reflections on their entire eight-week fellowship experience highlight the importance of PEC's fellowship program in building the next generation of land stewards.



"The program is valuable just because it connected me to so many people and experiences in conservation that I would have never encountered otherwise. I have a much better sense of what conservation looks like on a local level and feel more well-equipped to try to find a place in that field."

— **Rebecca Popp, Springfield, VA**

University of Virginia, Class of 2024

"I really struggled in the beginning with the idea of 'conservation for the sake of conservation.' The fellowship really opened my mind to how people enjoy nature and why people do conservation activities on their properties."

— **Darryl Acker-Carter, Annapolis, MD**

University of Maryland Baltimore, Class of 2023



"We got to explore the many different departments, fields and roles within the organization. Now I have a clear vision of what I might be interested in in terms of my future career."

— **Mohammad Ahmadi, Savoy, IL**

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Class of 2024

"Going through this gave me confidence that I could apply to jobs in this field because I have something in my toolbox now. And it was really cool seeing not only what PEC does but what other partner organizations do. Everyone was really down to earth and had a lot of genuine passion for their jobs."

— **Jimena Espinoza Rogovich, Warrenton, VA**

George Mason University, Class of 2023



"This experience reignited my motivation to continue developing my skills and my knowledge on planning and land use. Being out in the field made me realize I need to level up my education so I can get a job that I really want, something like PEC."

— **Julia Tracy, Norfolk, VA**

Virginia Commonwealth University, Class of 2023



The Fellows and a few PEC staff members camped in Shenandoah National Park and went on a sunrise hike to the summit of Hawksbill Mountain. Photo by Marco Sanchez



Fellows Jimena Espinoza Rogovich, Rebecca Popp and Julia Tracy examine macroinvertebrates as part of water quality monitoring at Rady Park in Warrenton. Photo by Hugh Kenny



PEC's October Greenfield led the Fellows on a bird walk through Sky Meadows State Park. Here, Darryl Acker-Carter holds a juvenile barn owl that October banded during their walk. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Tax-Smart Ways to Support PEC

Your support makes PEC's work possible and we are grateful for any and all donations. To provide the maximum contribution to PEC while receiving the maximum tax advantages for yourself, consider these strategies:

➤ Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCD)

For donors aged 70.5 years and older, a QCD allows for contributions to eligible charities directly from an IRA account. When an IRA financial institution makes that direct contribution, it reduces the donor's taxable income by the amount of the donation. For IRA holders aged 72 years and older, the donation also counts as part of the required annual minimum distribution. Most financial institutions have online forms that facilitate a QCD.

➤ Giving Through a Donor Advised Fund (DAF)

This is essentially an account a donor establishes with a tax deductible contribution that can then be drawn upon for future charitable giving. DAFs can be easily set up through a community foundation or your financial institution to serve as a flexible charitable giving vehicle.

➤ Gifts of Stock

Making a gift of appreciated stock is easy and allows the donor to receive the total value of the stock at the time of transfer as a tax-deductible gift. The direct gift eliminates the obligation to pay capital gains tax on the appreciation of the stock.

To learn more about these other giving options, visit pecva.org/giftassets

The Environmental Footprint of the Digital Age

Continued from cover

the utility can ask the state to approve eminent domain to route them through private property.

While residential energy demand in Virginia has remained flat, even in the midst of population growth, power demand for data centers has been increasing and currently makes up 21% of Dominion's entire power load in Virginia. Dominion projects a five percent annual increase to its peak energy load — essentially doubling today's energy demand in just 15 years — attributable almost entirely to data centers. This unheard-of increase will require billions of dollars for new high-voltage transmission lines, substations, and power generation facilities. If not for data centers, overall demand in the Commonwealth would be flat.

Water — Water consumption by data centers varies greatly depending on

the type of cooling system used. Cooling systems that remove heat through water evaporation can be more energy efficient, but they shift impact to local water resources. A single data center can use between 1 million and 5 million gallons of water per day — as much as a town of 10,000 to 50,000 people! As the availability or cost of energy become more limiting, we are concerned the industry may increase its use of water-consumptive cooling systems that use less energy but more water overall.

Land — The buildout of data centers and accompanying energy infrastructure is already resulting in the conversion of thousands of acres of forests and farms to impervious pavement and buildings. For scale, the Prince William Digital Gateway, mentioned above, would allow 27 million square feet of data centers — the equivalent of about 150 Wal-Mart Supercenters

— on 1,760 acres. All of this impervious surface reduces the region's drought and flood resiliency and increases stormwater runoff, flooding, and pollution in our waterways.

Air Quality — Data centers often use commercial-sized, diesel-fueled backup power generators and large fuel storage tanks to ensure uninterrupted 24/7 service in the case of a power grid outage, adding yet another layer to its environmental threats. According to the Va. Department of Environmental Quality, Loudoun County data centers already have air permits for more than 4,000 backup diesel generators with a rated capacity of 11 gigawatts. For context, the North Anna nuclear power facility in Louisa County, which provides 17% of Virginia's electricity, has a rated capacity of just 1.8 gigawatts. The data center development being envisioned would add hundreds more generators to Northern Virginia and rural communities where campuses are developed.

Diesel exhaust has well-documented health risks, especially for children, the elderly and those with existing health conditions like asthma and heart and lung disease. And of course, burning diesel emits greenhouse gasses, which contribute to regional ground-level ozone, acid rain, and global climate change. If the rapid pace of data center construction further strains Virginia's power grid, use of backup generators will become more routine than emergency, putting air quality and public health at risk.

Fossil fuels — Dominion has claimed that the explosive energy demand from approved data centers is impossible to meet with renewable energy sources alone and that it cannot meet the require-

ments of the Virginia Clean Economy Act while maintaining reliability. To address the forecasted energy demand, Dominion's Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) options include delaying the planned retirement of fossil fuel power sources, adding new natural gas power, and heavy reliance on purchasing out-of-state power (much of which is from heavily polluting sources), along with billions in spending for new transmission lines to move that power. While it also includes continued growth in renewable energy sources, these projects vary in siting and design and tend to be land-hungry. The IRP also puts a lot of faith in costly, unproven small modular nuclear sources becoming available in 10 years.

In a nutshell, Dominion is proposing that Virginia throw everything in the energy toolbox (and our pocketbooks) at this soaring demand and forfeit all progress on Virginia's climate initiatives.

In response, PEC is working with local governments and residents in the Piedmont to improve local planning and zoning to protect communities, especially those most vulnerable to utility rate hikes, air pollution, and climate impacts, as well as our lands, waters and wildlife. We've formed a Virginia data center reform coalition to bring together local organizations with state and national partners, leading the charge on a legislative platform that quantifies the impacts of this data center buildout and shifts the cost burden away from Virginia ratepayers at large. This effort includes a comprehensive study of the impacts to our natural resources and a framework to avoid and, when necessary, mitigate those impacts.

We ask all of our readers to join us in contacting elected officials in every corner of the state to demand better oversight of the data center industry and ensure costs are borne more fairly by the industry. It is critical that the state get a handle on this issue before it is too late.



A substation being built next to the WO&D Trail. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Making Biscuit Run Park Available to Everyone

Continued from cover

Foundation, PEC hired local engineering firm Line+Grade to help envision a well-designed bridge that connects residents to both the park and the area's trail network, which provides access to jobs, schools and shopping centers. After close consultation with stakeholders, careful review of current and future conditions, and iterative work through numerous possibilities, the project team has identified the optimal location for the best access with the least environmental impact, plus construction options and cost estimates.

And, our collective work revealed yet another opportunity. The County was already planning a major stream restoration project in the same area for 2025. By restoring the stream and building the bridge at the same time, the County can save significant costs, minimize environmental impacts, and make the park and greenway network available to more people, sooner. Frankly, it only makes sense to do the two projects

together.

That's the case that we (and many of you!) have made to County leadership, and they've heard us! Now, County staff is looking to modify its upcoming budget requests and is moving to synchronize the stream and bridge projects. The Genan Foundation has committed financial support for technical design activities in the interest of accelerating the bridge and aligning its construction with the stream restoration.

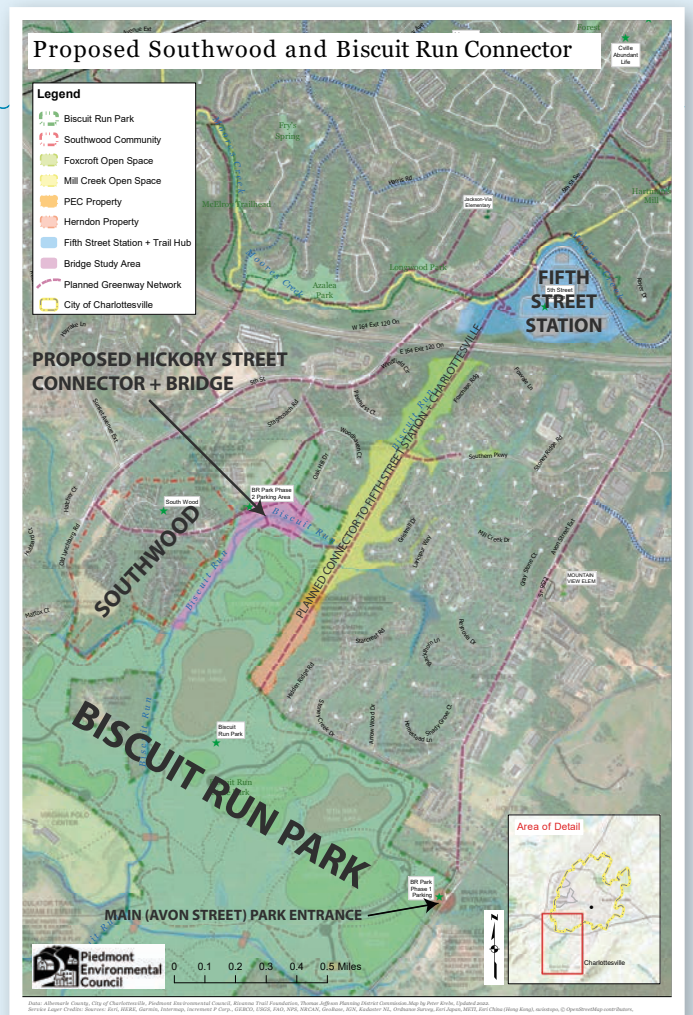
What's Next?

My own story, the research I have done, and my work with the community all inform my conviction that this park access project ought to be a top priority. However, I do not make assumptions about what other people think or want, so we asked Habitat families, Southwood residents, and other neighbors — at Market Day, trail work parties, and community meetings. Their support has been resounding, not only

vocally, but they're also putting in real, physical work that is making a difference.

In July, I was fortunate to take part in a work party during which several dozen current and future Southwood residents cleared a large section of trail near their neighborhood, transforming it from a narrow, intimidating path into a wide corridor where people can comfortably pass or walk side-by-side. The County also deserves credit for providing a way for residents to help get the park open sooner.

Yet, volunteers can only do so much. Providing a safe and sustainable stream crossing will be the County's responsibility. So far, the indications are hopeful, but what happens next remains to be seen. This positive step shows how critical it is for residents to voice their support for greenways and park access now and in the future. Learn more about this project, and see a video from the work party at pecva.org/cvillegreenways.



Map showing location of proposed bridge. By Peter Krebs

On the Ground

Albemarle & Charlottesville

- ▶ PEC's work on **Albemarle County's Comprehensive Plan update** includes the completion of our comprehensive plan policy platform to be shared with communities and organizations. We've presented this policy platform to the Cville100 Climate Alliance and more recently at the Resilient Virginia conference in Charlottesville. Our ongoing comprehensive plan work to protect the rural areas of the County includes recently engaging with the Esmont, Crossroads, and Batesville communities.
- ▶ The **Fifeville Community Trail**, supported by PEC in a variety of ways, is nearing completion with the addition of solar-powered lights and historical signage. Nestled in an urban forest, this trail makes it possible for neighborhood residents to travel safely to Cherry Avenue, Tonsler Park and into the heart of Charlottesville without the company of fast-moving traffic. Learn more at pecva.org/fifeville.
- ▶ The Charlottesville-Albemarle Metropolitan Planning Organization is beginning work on its **Long-Range Transportation Plan**, which will lay out funding priorities for the next several decades, with major implications for residents' quality of life and future land conservation in both localities. Over the next few months, residents will be invited to weigh in on which projects are selected and how they are prioritized. More information at campo.tjpd.org/process-documents/lrtp/

Clarke

- ▶ Working with the Clarke County Conservation Easement Authority (CEA), PEC's Clarke County Land Conservation Fund donated just over \$7,000 to fill a financing gap and **complete a purchased conservation easement**, which was recorded in June. This no-division easement is held by the CEA and permanently protects 2,640 linear feet along the Opequon Creek.
- ▶ In June, the Board of Supervisors approved a **site development plan and special use permit for Carter Hall** to be converted to a country inn, with 17 required conditions that were recommended by county planning officials in response to public concerns over the redevelopment proposal. The owners determined the conditions made the project unfeasible and decided instead to auction off the estate, and bidding took place from September 1-15.
- ▶ Anticipating a Special Use Permit application for a fourth **utility-scale solar project**, the Board of Supervisors directed the Planning Commission to craft a Zoning Ordinance Amendment prohibiting any future installations in the county. As an alternative, PEC is recommending a strong ordinance that supports private solar for farmers and residents and allows limited utility-scale solar in a way that protects agricultural lands and quality of life.

Culpeper

- ▶ North Ridge Solar withdrew its proposal for a 250+-acre **utility-scale solar project in Stevensburg** after the Culpeper Board of Supervisors determined it was not in compliance with the 2023 Comprehensive Plan. Our primary concern with this proposal was its adjacency to the approved, but as-yet unbuilt 1,000-acre Greenwood Solar project.

- ▶ Despite the Planning Commission's tied vote on the **Copper Ridge data center campus**, the rezoning application moved to the Town Council for a public hearing and probable vote on Sept. 12. PEC opposes this project for the effects an industrial data center complex will have on nearby Culpeper National Cemetery and Mountain Brook Estates neighborhood, and the cumulative impact of this and other data center approvals on energy and transmission demand.

Fauquier

- ▶ In July, Headwaters Site Development LLC filed an **application to rezone 60+ acres in Catlett** from Light Industrial to Business Park for a proposed data center development and withdrew its proposed zoning text amendment that would have allowed data centers in Business Park Zoning to use overhead transmission lines. How the fully built-out facility's energy demands will be met are unclear. PEC will continue to weigh in on this application and larger energy infrastructure needs.
- ▶ Open Roads Renewables withdrew its appeal of the Planning Commission's denial of the **Alameda Solar project in Midland**. The company plans to submit a new application that proposes a site redesign, reduction of the total acreage, and removal of solar panels from sensitive areas such as the Fauquier airport runway and near the Blackwelltown District.
- ▶ At an August public hearing, the Board of Supervisors denied an appeal by Torch Clean Energy, upholding the Planning Commission's finding that the company's **Sowego solar proposal in Bristersburg** was not compliant with the County's Comprehensive Plan. If the company wants to pursue this project, it must file another Comprehensive Plan Consistency Review application with the County.

Greene

- ▶ Greene County has completed its **Comprehensive Plan Update** and continues to update its zoning ordinance.
- ▶ The Board of Supervisors deferred a vote on an amended Special Use Permit application for the **Sojourner glamping project** while it waits for the results of a lawsuit challenging their approval of the original proposal for 144 tent units on 84.94 acres. The amended application would add an abutting 70-acre parcel to the proposed development without adding more tent units or accessory uses.

Loudoun

- ▶ At the July Board of Supervisors meeting, a **"Purchase of Development Rights" (PDR) program** was designated as a top priority, and County staff has been directed to complete plans for an active program by Spring 2024. A PDR funding proposal will go before the County's Finance, Government Operations & Economic Development Committee on September 12. PEC will submit a letter in support of the PDR program.
- ▶ The Board of Supervisors held its first public hearing on the latest draft of the **Zoning Ordinance Rewrite** on July 26 and forwarded the draft to its Transportation and Land Use subcommittee, which will discuss it and address issues raised by staff and

the public, beginning in September. The Board of Supervisors will hold another public hearing before adopting the ordinance, which is expected by the end of 2023.

- ▶ The Planning Commission held a second public hearing for the draft **Prime Soils and Cluster Subdivision Zoning Amendment** in July and forwarded the amendment to a work session. PEC, in partnership with other rural stakeholders, will continue to give input during this process. We anticipate a final public hearing after the Planning Commission reviews a consultant report on the impacts of the draft and makes additional edits.

Madison

- ▶ In July, Madison County denied the application for the **utility-scale solar facility long proposed for 90+ acres of farmland behind Yoder's Country Market**. In addition to lingering unanswered questions about decommissioning and future ownership of the facility, county supervisors cited concerns voiced by PEC about converting productive farmland to an industrial use.
- ▶ PEC is playing an active role in Madison County's **Comprehensive Plan review process** and will advocate for meaningful public input opportunities this fall.

Orange

- ▶ PEC is lending our land use and planning expertise to aid American Battlefield Trust and the other plaintiffs in their **lawsuit against Orange County for violations of state law and local ordinance in approving Wilderness Crossing**. While a hearing date has not yet been set, the County recently rescinded the improperly-enacted building height zoning amendment, acknowledging its error on at least one of the plaintiffs' complaints.
- ▶ PEC is studying **several proposals making their way through Orange County's planning review process**, including mud bogging events on an agricultural property near a residential subdivision and two commercial solar facilities near the Town of Orange.

Rappahannock

- ▶ PEC staff continue to support the Rappahannock County Park with **restoration of the Rush River riparian area's** native forest canopy and trail system. Invasive species management activities will begin in priority areas this fall.
- ▶ PEC is actively following the Planning Commission and county staff update and restructure of the **County's Zoning Ordinance**, largely to improve its clarity and alignment with the Virginia State Code. Planning Commission work sessions will begin in the fall, with a final draft anticipated by the end of 2023.
- ▶ The Sperryville Community Alliance has completed the second phase of invasive species management along the **Sperryville Trail Network** and Thornton River, guided by the Invasive Species Management Plan funded by PEC's Krebsler Fund for Rappahannock County Conservation. Efforts to restore the trail's native tree canopy will be supported by the Virginia Outdoors Foundation's Get Outdoors Program and a joint PEC-Friends of the Rappahannock tree planting this fall.

Out & About

2023 Annual Meeting: Inspiring Conservation

Our 2023 Annual Meeting: Inspiring Conservation, on June 10, saw more than 100 new and familiar faces join us for a day of celebration. Dr. Mamie Parker, former head of fisheries at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, delighted all with an energizing keynote message layered with humor and moving anecdotes of passion, inspiration, and excellence in conservation.

We also received overwhelmingly positive feedback about the three concurrent workshops ably presented by PEC staff members on the proliferation of data centers in Virginia, the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative and our holistic approach to conservation in the Potomac watershed. We thank our generous annual meeting sponsors Country Chevrolet and Plow & Hearth, and appreciate Meadowkirk's wonderful staff for hosting us at this most picturesque meeting facility.



▲ Dr. Mamie Parker's keynote address was an inspirational start to the 2023 Annual Meeting. Photo by Hugh Kenny



▲ PEC Land Conservation Director Mike Kane and other members of our conservation team give one of three presentations of the day. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Soil Health Workshop at Roundabout Meadows



▲ This spring and summer, we hosted several free events at our Roundabout Meadows property in Aldie, including a wildflower walk, and a birding walk. Here, at our Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows, Farm and Property Specialist Mitchell Pittman teaches attendees about composting and building healthy soils. Photo by Dana Melby

Clean Water Farm Award



▲ In June, the John Marshall Soil and Water Conservation District, along with Fauquier County Supervisor Mary Leigh McDaniel and PEC's Hallie Harriman, awarded Vanessa Sandin of Pohick Farm with the Local Clean Water Farm Award. This award recognizes farmers who implement conservation practices, leading to maintaining, and even improving, water quality for not only their farm but countless others downstream. Photo by Linnea Stewart

Orvis Giveback Days



▲ Orvis's northern Virginia retailers in Leesburg, Tysons and Arlington chose PEC as the charity for its Orvis GIVEBACK Days for the third year, contributing a total of \$47,842 toward our trout restoration and tree planting programs. This summer, PEC staff Linnea Stewart and Maggi Blomstrom accepted a generous \$8,298 to purchase thousands of native trees and shrubs for PEC's Plantings in the Piedmont, ensuring that our waters stay cool, clean, and connected for the next generation. Photo by Marco Sanchez

Sources of Conservation Funding Workshop



▲ In July, 90 community members joined PEC, the National Resource Conservation Service, the John Marshall Soil and Water Conservation District, and Fauquier County staff at Powers Farm & Brewery in Midland for this informative workshop. Topics included pollinator plantings, conservation options, and financial and technical assistance available to landowners for land stewardship and conservation practices, such as livestock fencing and water troughs. Presentations are available on our website at: bit.ly/cons-ws-23. Photo by Marco Sanchez

Land Conservation & Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative in Albemarle



▲ On July 27, as part of the Rivanna Master Naturalists' continuing education lecture series at the Ivy Creek Natural Area, PEC staff gave presentations on local land conservation efforts, the basics of conservation easements, and the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative. Photo by Kim Biasioli



UPCOMING Events

Event details subject to change. Please check pecva.org/events for the latest information.

Loop de Ville and Mini Mobility Summit

When > Sept. 23-24

Where > Rivanna River Company (1520 E High St) and the Wool Factory (1837 Broadway), Charlottesville

This is a full weekend of no-cost hikes, walks, runs, and bike rides celebrating National Public Lands Day—plus a **free** Mighty Joshua concert and a Mini Mobility Summit, where you can learn about future plans and ways to get involved with local trails and connectivity efforts. Visit rivannatrails.org/LoopdeVille.

Pastures and Meadows Field Walk at Roundabout Meadows

When > Sept. 30, 9-11 AM

Where > 40309 John Mosby Highway, Aldie

Join PEC staff on a walk through the pastures and meadows at Roundabout Meadows to learn about grazing practices, agricultural best management practices, grassland birds, and meadow restoration. The 1.3-mile mowed path will take guests through rolling pastures and across a small creek, so wear appropriate footwear and clothing for longer grass and uneven terrain. Registration required at pecva.org/events.

Volunteer Tree Plantings

When > Oct. and Nov.

Where > Various locations, stay tuned!

This fall, we'll need lots of volunteers to help us scalp grass, dig holes, pound stakes and plant native species to improve water quality and wildlife habitat in the Rappahannock and Potomac watersheds. Stay tuned to our website, pecva.org/trees, for the latest opportunities to sign up. More information, contact PEC's Tree Planting & Stewardship Coordinator Linnea Stewart at lstewart@pecva.org.

The Book of Wilding – a Practical Guide to Rewilding Big and Small with Isabella Tree

When > Oct. 2, 5-7 PM

Where > Middleburg Community Center

Join PEC, The Garden Conservancy and Oak Spring Garden Foundation for a talk by award-winning journalist and author Isabella Tree about how people can do their part to restore nature. Whether we have a garden, a pond, or a window box, no space too small for rewilding. Visit pecva.org/wilding for more info and registration. Tickets are \$55.

Riparian Buffer Workshop for Landowners:

Basics and Funding Opportunities at Blandy Experimental Farm

When > Oct. 11, 6:30 PM

Where > 400 Blandy Farm Road, Boyce

Join the Lord Fairfax Soil and Water Conservation District, the Va. Department of Forestry, and PEC for a workshop on this important tool for improving water quality in our local watersheds and sources of funding for implementing buffers on your property. Register at blandy.virginia.edu/content/programs-workshops-walks.

Native Plant Sale & Community Day

When > Oct. 8, 9 AM-3 PM

Where > Clermont, 801 E Main St, Berryville

At this event focused on native plants and natural products, PEC is giving a one-hour talk and walk through the riparian buffer planting that we did with volunteers in November 2022. Join us and learn about the planting process, how the trees have been growing, and the importance of maintaining our natural resources. Entry fee is \$5 per car. Learn more at: pecva.org/event/native-plant-sale-community-day-at-clermont/

Solar on the Farm – Working Ag Workshop

When > Nov. 14, 9:30 AM-1 PM

Where > Kildee Farm, 19295 Batna Road, Culpeper

This PEC-led workshop is a chance for agricultural producers and rural small businesses to learn about the latest financial incentives for rooftop or small-scale solar and battery backup available for farm and home needs. For more information, visit pecva.org/event/solar-on-the-farm-working-ag

MEET PEC

Sarah Parmelee

Land Use Field Representative, Culpeper County

by Sophia Chapin, Communications Specialist

"One of the things that really sold me on this is the journalistic nature of approaching land use decisions," says Sarah Parmelee, PEC's field representative for Culpeper County.

Since joining PEC in August 2022, Sarah has been tackling big questions around data centers, utility-scale solar, and other land use trends in the mostly rural jurisdiction. Her days involve deep research into proposals, analyzing their implication and communicating back-and-forth with residents, county staff and decision makers.

With previous experience at the Virginia Department of Forestry, Sarah sees this role as another iteration of her passion to advance conservation. "The opportunity to make more of an impact through land use decisions was really exciting to me," she says.

With deep agricultural roots, Culpeper has long maintained that a strong rural character is core to its identity. Residents often cite its scenic farmland, walkable towns, natural areas and historic sites, and small-business economy as reasons they've made it home. However, a recent slew of proposals for industrial development has brought the county's future into question.

"From my perspective, an ideal direction for Culpeper is smart growth around the towns, the already-established urban areas that can support it, and a more active effort to preserve the farms and forest lands that make this place livable and separate from Northern Virginia," says Sarah, who lives in Jeffersonston, Va.

Outside of advocacy, Sarah loves spending time in the outdoors — horseback riding, foraging on community trails, tending to the native landscaping in her suburban backyard, and making appearances at tree plantings and prescribed burns.



Photo by Hugh Kenny

MEET PEC

Rob McGinnis

Senior Field Representative, Albemarle and Greene counties

by Sophia Chapin, Communications Specialist

For Rob McGinnis, the jump to a land use role in the greater Charlottesville area felt like a logical progression. He's lived in its principal city for most of the last 40 years and has spent a career in resource conservation and sustainability through landscape architecture, often in collaboration with local and federal governments. "That work started to be eclipsed by climate change, but without the local focus I wanted," he said.

He joined PEC staff at a critical moment for Albemarle County — the drafting of its AC44 comprehensive plan, which will guide the county's planning and zoning decisions for the next 20 years. "It's an opportunity to think about the county as a whole, so PEC's advocacy work is heavily focused on protecting the rural areas from sprawl and showcasing their major role in addressing climate change," Rob said.

For him, the work in Albemarle and Greene is personal. "I've been spending time in both counties for decades," he says, citing birding walks with his wife, countryside drives and fly-fishing for native brook trout in the mountains. "These are not just great places to take a hike or look at scenery. They're really doing a lot for us in terms of carbon sequestration, food and water security, biodiversity."

He hopes to curtail the narrative that rural and urban areas are at odds with each other, rather than mutually-dependent for a resilient future. "It's daunting. But the good news is that there are a lot of really smart people and organizations doubling and tripling down on fighting climate change. People haven't thrown in the towel."



Photo by Hugh Kenny

Dear Friends,

The fall is, for many of us, a time to restart and re-energize after a summer of vacation. For PEC, this particular fall is the beginning of a period of redoubled effort across the full range of our programs to ensure the Piedmont continues to be a national model for sustainable growth and conservation. We are also girding for an extended and difficult debate about the impact of the explosion of data center development and the rapid expansion of related energy infrastructure all across Virginia, but particularly in the Piedmont and Northern Virginia.

All over the globe, cloud computing, data mining, artificial intelligence, communications and all things digital are exploding. But for a combination of reasons, Virginia bears a grossly disproportionate share of the infrastructure that underpins it all.

The volume of major land use proposals threatens everything we've achieved together over the past 50 years. To date, we're counting well over 100 million square feet of new data center campuses that will take as much land as roughly 500 Walmart supercenters and consume more energy than all other uses in Virginia combined. Increasingly secretive dealings and disregard for community opposition is undermining our power as engaged citizens. The collective data center-related challenge we face today is far greater than Disney's America was 30 years ago, and we need to approach it with an even greater level of time, commitment, legal assistance, partner engagement, communications, and every other tool in our arsenal.

As a society, we need to strike a balance between the potential prosperity that massive investment in high tech offers and the potential negative impacts that come with it — to public health, drinking water, climate goals, farmlands and forests, wildlife, communities and quality of life. As PEC works to understand, communicate, and respond to the scale and scope of

the challenge, we will need your support to ensure Virginia's new economy is aligned with smart planning and conservation values. This can only happen with additional resources for staff, experts on energy and energy infrastructure, legal representation in what's sure to be an extended battle, and an expanded communications and civic engagement program.

The upcoming election of local and state representatives is an opportunity to educate candidates about issues of importance to you. PEC has worked with partners at the Virginia Conservation Network to publish *Our Common Agenda*, an in-depth analysis of conservation issues facing Virginia and practical state-level policy recommendations to keep us moving in the right direction. You can find these recommendations at: vcnva.org/our-common-agenda. We need you, too, to let your local and state officials know your own expectations about how we plan for this growing industry, how we regulate to minimize its most significant impacts on our land, communities, and power grid, and how we mitigate the inevitable harm it brings to the lands and resources we care about the most.

The reality is, there is no transparent, commonly understood planning in Virginia for either the data center sector or for the energy infrastructure required to support the explosive growth in data centers. But, relying on our past experience with land use and energy infrastructure planning decisions at the local level, PEC has for the past three years been sounding the alarm at local, state and national levels, raising awareness among the public, and organizing new coalitions that we hope together will bring about a transformational change in the state's approach to data



Representatives from several groups joined together at PEC's office on July 27 to kick off a statewide data center reform coalition.

Photo by Hugh Kenny

center development that protects the people of Virginia and all we've fought and worked for to make the Piedmont what it is today.

We need your support now more than ever. The pressures on our region are real and growing and we must respond and deliver solutions that protect our natural resources while advancing Virginia's clean energy future. To implement our strategy, PEC needs 30% more annual support to take on the challenge that data center siting and energy use represents, in addition to our core programs. Every donation makes a difference, and we are deeply appreciative of your past support that has helped us accomplish so much. Our goal is to raise an additional \$1.5 million to cover our current expenses and respond to the threats and opportunities ahead — we hope we can count on you to help us during this critical time.

Sincerely,

Chris Miller, President

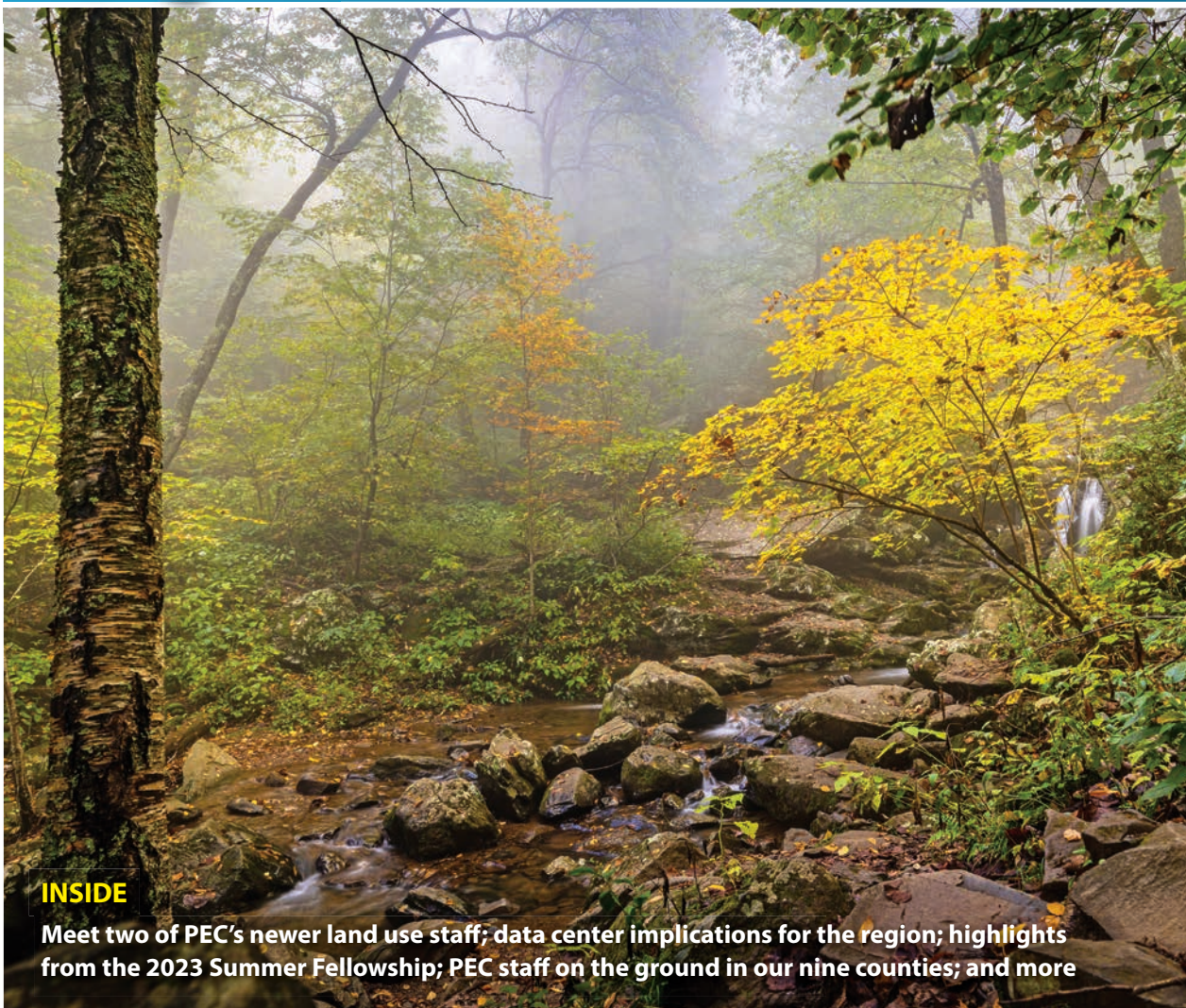


Photo by Hugh Kenny



The Piedmont View

A MEMBERSHIP NEWSLETTER OF THE PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL AUTUMN 2023



INSIDE

Meet two of PEC's newer land use staff; data center implications for the region; highlights from the 2023 Summer Fellowship; PEC staff on the ground in our nine counties; and more

Fall foliage in Shenandoah National Park. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Pop Quiz

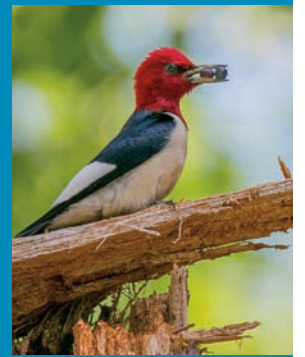
QUESTION

How are Virginia's woodpeckers able to peck a surface with a g-force equivalent of roughly 250 mph without brain injury?

- a) Their brains are tightly packed inside their skulls so their brains don't bounce around.
- b) Their tongues offer padding by wrapping the back of their brain and neck.
- c) They have spongy plates inside their skulls that act as cushions.
- d) All of the above.
- e) None of the above.

ANSWER ON PAGE 2

The red-headed woodpecker is one of eight *Picadaes* species in Virginia.
Photo by October Greenfield



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