

CONSERVATION EDITION

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The Sperryville Trail Network

Uniting a Community and Creating a Sense of Place

By Laura O'Brien, Field Representative

In my first year as the Rappahannock County Field Representative for The Piedmont Environmental Council, one central theme has jumped out: the importance of a sense of place in strengthening the connections between communities and the local natural environment. This sense of place is often what drives private landowners to conserve their land, and it's one of the many reasons why expanding public access to the outdoors in the Piedmont is so critical. So, when I took on my current role with PEC, walking through the villages of Rappahannock to gain insight on the sense of place unique to each one was early on my to-do list.

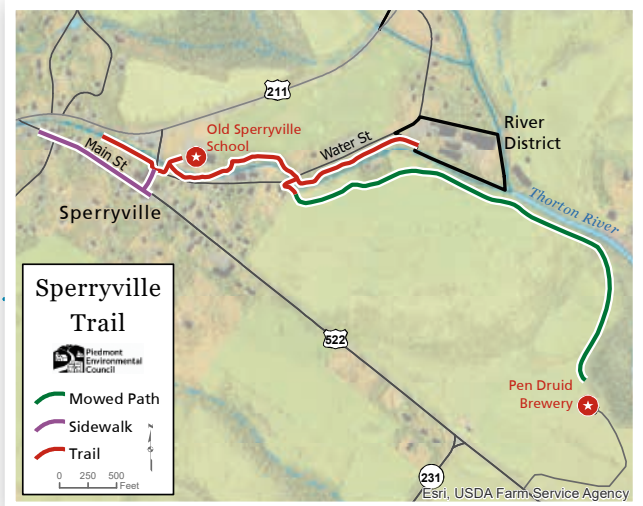
In Sperryville, I was able to safely discover this village's ecological, scenic, historic, economic, and agricultural features all on foot, just by traversing the roughly 1.5-mile Sperryville Trail Network. This spectacular community gem got its start in 2019 thanks to the Sperryville Community Alliance (the Alliance), an all-volunteer nonprofit made up of village residents and business owners who promote activities to enhance the safety, inclusiveness, and vitality of the Sperryville community.

A Walk Through Sperryville

You may have driven through Sperryville on your way to the Thornton Gap entrance to Shenandoah National Park. But this historic village is much more than just a place to pass through, and I found the Sperryville Trail Network to be the perfect tour guide.

I started my walk at its northernmost end on Main Street in Sperryville. The first 550 feet of the crushed stone and wood chip trail funnels pedestrians along the Thornton River, behind numerous local businesses that kindly share access through their lands with trail-goers, to the old Sperryville schoolhouse.

Further downstream, past other local businesses and across Route 522, the trail intersects Water Street and diverges into two paths. The left offers a safe connection to the village's River District, while the right provides a direct walk all the way to Pen Druid, a local brewery previously only accessible by vehicle off of Route 522.



This map shows the Sperryville Trail Network from Main Street to the River District and Pen Druid Brewery.

The latter option traverses Mount Vernon Farm, a beautiful property protected by a conservation easement held by the Virginia Outdoors Foundation. In fact, one of the things that makes the Sperryville Trail Network so special is that it's a publicly accessible trail entirely on private land. "Simply stated, the network of trails would not be possible without the support and generosity of the landowners who have allowed the trail to cross their properties. They've been important to connecting our community and providing a safe and beautiful amenity for our residents and visitors, while drawing attention to the preservation and protection of the Thornton River," said Kerry Suttan, president of the Alliance.

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PAGE 7 Upcoming Events



Conserving a Piece of Heaven

By Cindy Sabato, Communications Advisor

From the wrap-around porch at Hans and Anne Wachtmeister's Fauquier County home, I feel as if I'm standing atop a mountain looking across heaven. The lush green velvet-like rolling hills at the center of this cattle farm are enveloped by forest, and I can look across the landscape to the west and south and see for miles...the Town of Warrenton, Airlie runway, the Warrenton Training Center, the protected lands of The Clifton Institute and Wildcat Mountain, and even the Blue Ridge in the distance. And if I can see all the way to these places, well, that means they can see all the way here, too.

This is Belmont Hill Farm, named for the Massachusetts boys' school where Hans

taught biology for more than 30 years. And it's one of seven Fauquier County properties permanently protected with a conservation easement last year.

Belmont Hill Farm is part of what was known as Whitehall Farm when Hans' father first bought the 600 or 700 acres after moving to the U.S. from Sweden in the 1940s. The family of five lived on the other side of the property in a house with log cabin origins that hinted at its long history. The narrow winding driveway I took on my way in was once an old logging trail; 20 years ago, Hans planted all the black gum, oak, and other native trees that now form its canopy.

Hans lived here until 7th grade, when

school, college, and a long and distinguished teaching career led him to New England, other parts of Virginia, and back to New England again. But memories of this place — tossing hay bales into wagons, fishing and catching frogs in the streams, ice skating where the water from

underground springs built up and froze, sledging down the front hill — made certain he always planned to return, "someday."

Hans' late brother's family still owns and farms roughly half of the original Whitehall Farm property, while Hans and Anne, now retired, create new memories, many with their children and grandchildren, here at Belmont Hill Farm. Hans lights up telling me about tending his herds of Hereford cattle. Photos of cows and calves are accompanied by stories of their first bull John Henry, a long-lived bottle-fed calf named Penny, now pregnant for the fifth time, and the adventures and misadventures of several others. "I get sentimentally attached to these animals. I can sit out here and watch them all day. You take a look at all of this and you can understand why we came back," Hans said.

Their decision to conserve the 381-acre Belmont Hill Farm was a slow and steady one. "I don't know for sure, but I think my dad wanted this to happen. My brother conserved his part of the farm in 2006," Hans said. Anne, an avid gardener, added that some neighbors, too, have encouraged them to place their land under a conservation easement. "But I don't

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Hans and Anne Wachtmeister at Belmont Hill Farm. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Support PEC

Make a donation or get in touch with PEC at:

Post Office Box 460
Warrenton, VA 20188
540.347.2334
pec@pecva.org

Or visit:
www.pecva.org

Thank you for helping to protect the Piedmont!



2022 Land Conservation Totals

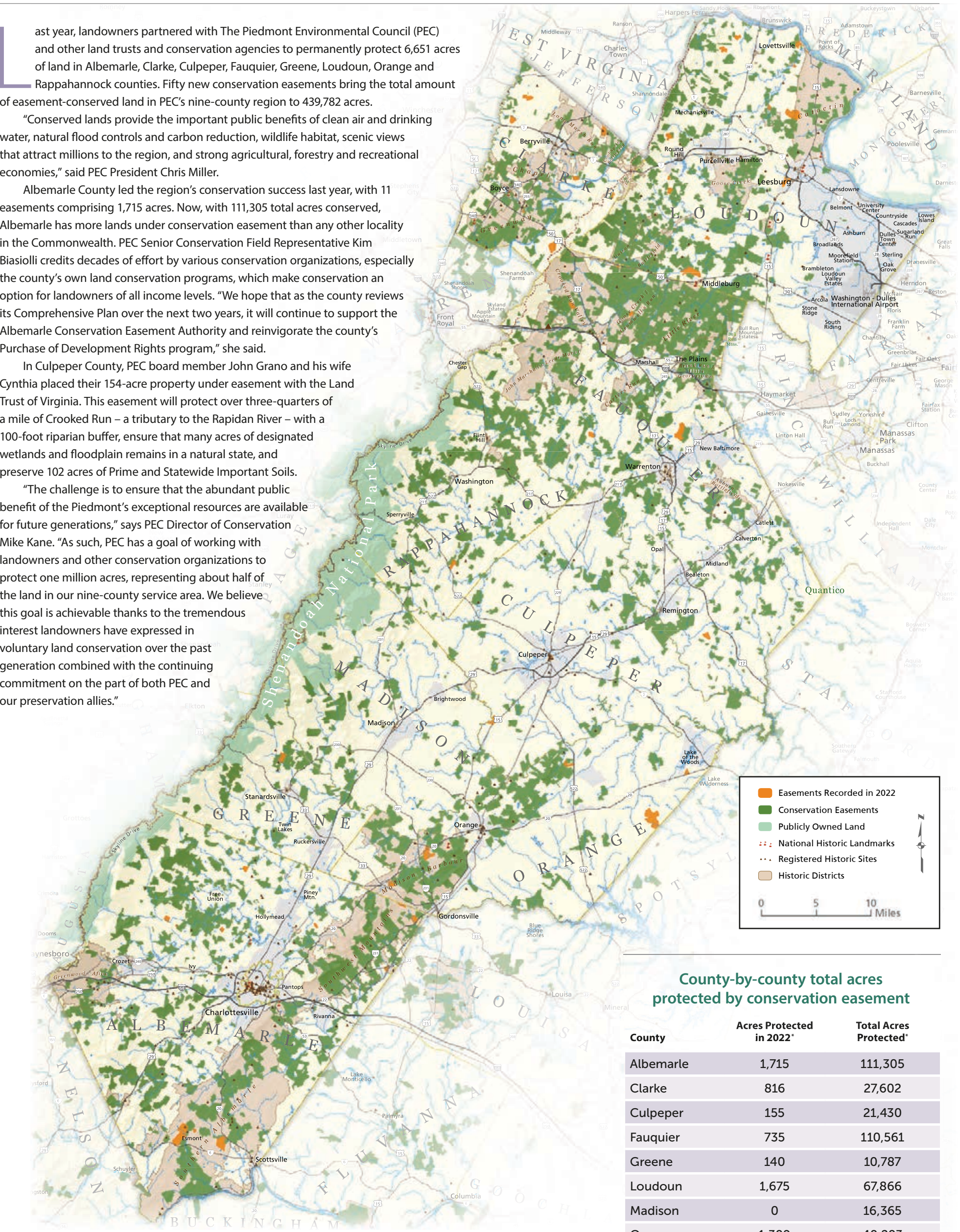
Last year, landowners partnered with The Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC) and other land trusts and conservation agencies to permanently protect 6,651 acres of land in Albemarle, Clarke, Culpeper, Fauquier, Greene, Loudoun, Orange and Rappahannock counties. Fifty new conservation easements bring the total amount of easement-conserved land in PEC’s nine-county region to 439,782 acres.

“Conserved lands provide the important public benefits of clean air and drinking water, natural flood controls and carbon reduction, wildlife habitat, scenic views that attract millions to the region, and strong agricultural, forestry and recreational economies,” said PEC President Chris Miller.

Albemarle County led the region’s conservation success last year, with 11 easements comprising 1,715 acres. Now, with 111,305 total acres conserved, Albemarle has more lands under conservation easement than any other locality in the Commonwealth. PEC Senior Conservation Field Representative Kim Biasiulli credits decades of effort by various conservation organizations, especially the county’s own land conservation programs, which make conservation an option for landowners of all income levels. “We hope that as the county reviews its Comprehensive Plan over the next two years, it will continue to support the Albemarle Conservation Easement Authority and reinvigorate the county’s Purchase of Development Rights program,” she said.

In Culpeper County, PEC board member John Grano and his wife Cynthia placed their 154-acre property under easement with the Land Trust of Virginia. This easement will protect over three-quarters of a mile of Crooked Run – a tributary to the Rapidan River – with a 100-foot riparian buffer, ensure that many acres of designated wetlands and floodplain remains in a natural state, and preserve 102 acres of Prime and Statewide Important Soils.

“The challenge is to ensure that the abundant public benefit of the Piedmont’s exceptional resources are available for future generations,” says PEC Director of Conservation Mike Kane. “As such, PEC has a goal of working with landowners and other conservation organizations to protect one million acres, representing about half of the land in our nine-county service area. We believe this goal is achievable thanks to the tremendous interest landowners have expressed in voluntary land conservation over the past generation combined with the continuing commitment on the part of both PEC and our preservation allies.”



County-by-county total acres protected by conservation easement

County	Acres Protected in 2022*	Total Acres Protected*
Albemarle	1,715	111,305
Clarke	816	27,602
Culpeper	155	21,430
Fauquier	735	110,561
Greene	140	10,787
Loudoun	1,675	67,866
Madison	0	16,365
Orange	1,309	40,203
Rappahannock	106	33,662
PEC Region	6,650	439,782

* Numbers are rounded

Learn more about protecting your land with a conservation easement at pecva.org/easements.

Map by Watsun Randolph
Map created by PEC for presentation purposes only. Data source: American Battlefield Protection Program, County Governments, USGS, VA Department of Historic Resources, VA Department of Conservation and Recreation. Although efforts have been made to verify data, accuracy is not guaranteed.

A Neighborhood Conservation Effort along South River

By Maggi Blomstrom, Rappahannock-Rapidan Conservation Initiative Coordinator

In Greene County, a community-wide effort to protect land along the South River has been underway for nearly two decades. South River is a jewel of a mountain stream that originates in Shenandoah National Park and winds its way about 14 miles before its confluence with the Rapidan River. Thanks in large part to the neighborhood effort, approximately 2,000 acres of land have been permanently protected.

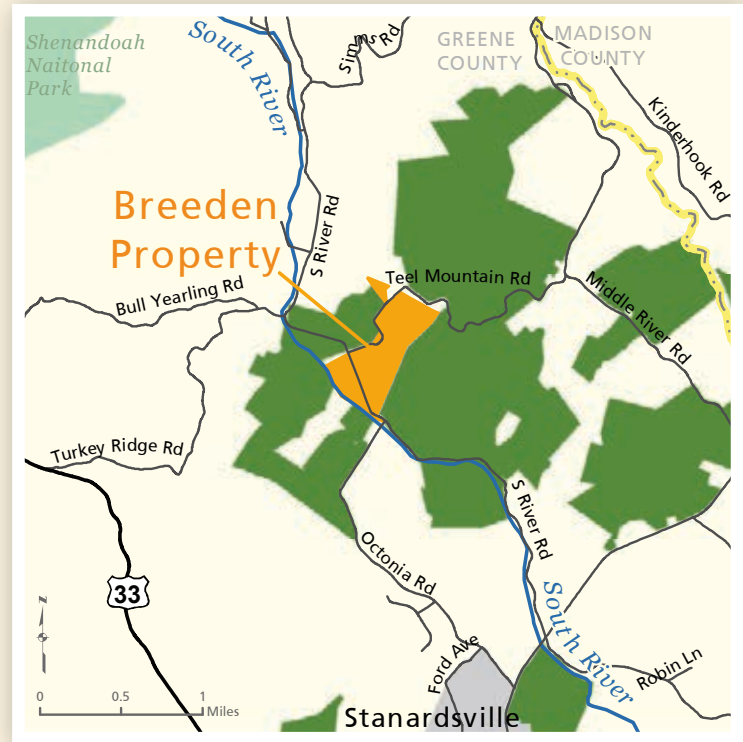
In 2022, a critical 140-acre multi-generational cattle farm was added to the tapestry of this corridor with a conservation easement generously donated to PEC by Mr. Laymon Breeden, who wanted to protect the farm in part to honor his father. With its 2,850 feet of frontage along the South River, a tributary of the Rapidan River, conservation of this property will help protect water quality within the Rappahannock River watershed. In

addition, 45% of the property's soils are designated as Prime Farmland or Farmland of Statewide Importance, which will now not be lost to development.

Most exciting about the conservation of the Breeden's farm is that it fills in a sort of doughnut hole at the center of many adjoining conservation easements that are held by the Virginia Outdoors Foundation. The collective impacts of what we call the South Run conservation corridor are tremendous in terms of water quality, forestry, and soil protection, as well as for preserving the scenic viewsheds for the traveling public along South River and Teel Mountain roads.

Conservation of any one property has invaluable positive impacts, but the combined efforts of so many conservation-minded neighbors working together to protect a broader area magnifies those impacts tremendously. Larger areas of undisturbed lands promote cleaner waters, support greater biodiversity and encourage ecological resilience. "Our neighbor, Laymon Breeden, taught my husband, Rodney, and me what it means to have reverence for the land. Mr. Breeden's life-long tenure of his farm is testimony to the importance of land preservation," said South River landowner Chee Ricketts.

We applaud Mr. Breeden for taking action to conserve his farm, and we also wish to recognize those who've made contributions to special funding sources, held by the Piedmont Foundation that help make conservation an option for landowners of all income levels. The Greene County Land Conservation Fund helps PEC protect at-risk properties in Greene by providing financial assistance for direct costs



The newly conserved Breeden property is surrounded by previously conserved lands along the South River.

Map by Watsun Randolph

PEC Conservation Funds

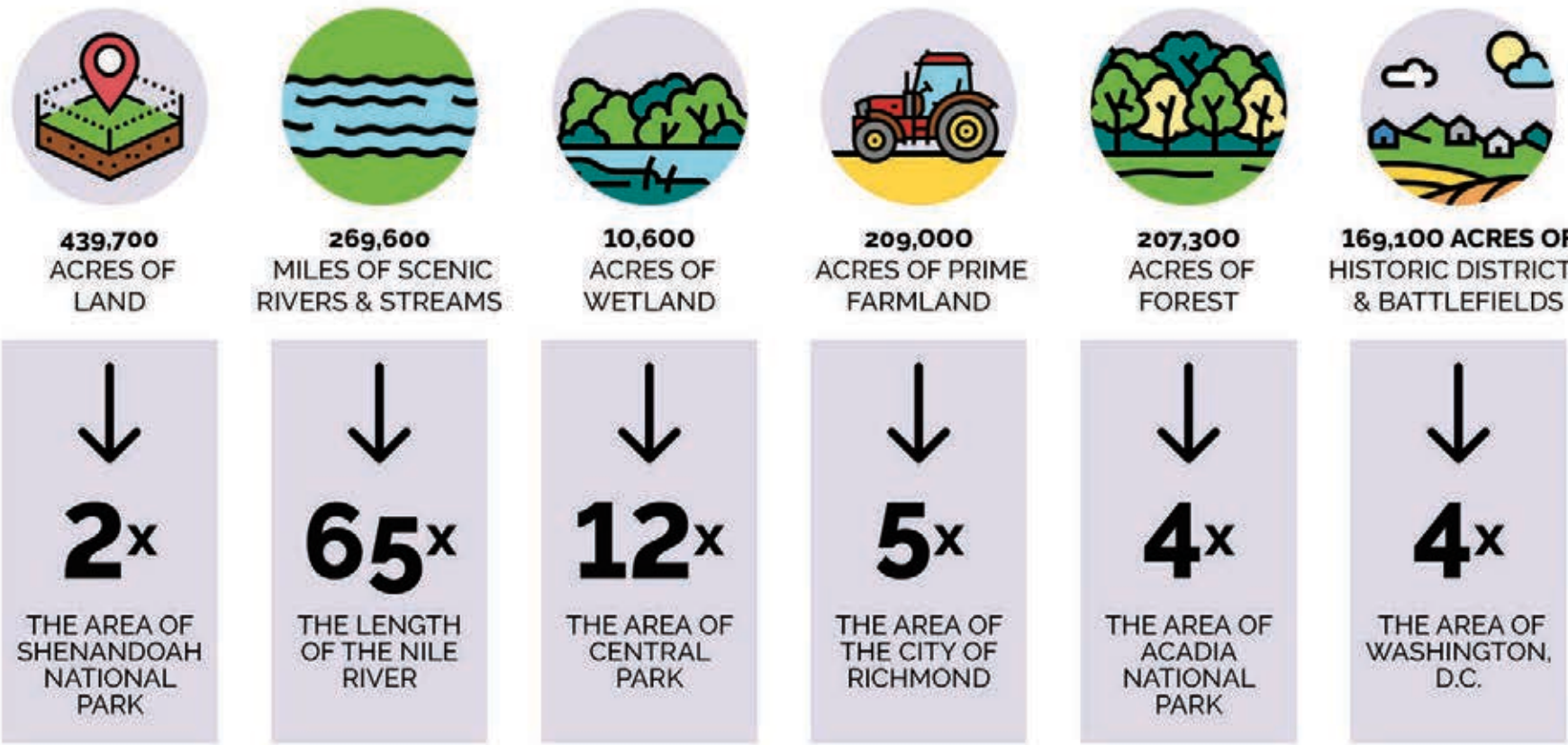
This map shows donor-designated funds created for on-the-ground conservation and restoration projects in specific geographic areas within The Piedmont Environmental Council service territory. The majority of the funds are held by the Piedmont Foundation, a separate 509(a)(3) charitable organization established to hold and manage special funds in support of PEC's mission. Learn more at piedmontfoundation.org

associated with donating an easement, such as appraisal fees. And, thanks to a generous gift previously made by Bob French to the foundation's Stewardship Fund, PEC was able to support the perpetual stewardship of this farm and others, without cost to the landowners.

If you would like to accelerate conservation efforts in your county with a financial gift, please contact Nora Seilheimer at nseilheimer@pecva.org or 434-977-2033, x7008, or visit pecva.org/donate. If you would like to learn more about conservation opportunities, contact Mike Kane at mikane@pecva.org.

THE CUMULATIVE IMPACT OF LAND CONSERVATION

These comparisons help show how much has been protected by conservation easements in PEC's nine-county area.



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PRESERVING THE PIEDMONT

Volunteer Spotlight: Felix Kontanis and Jennifer Dorrer

By Sophia Chapin, Communications Specialist

Each spring and fall, PEC welcomes dozens of volunteers who get their hands dirty and their feet muddy helping us plant native trees and shrubs along streams on private properties. These riparian buffers help improve drinking water, provide wildlife habitat, and offer flood protections, among other benefits. We caught up with two of our tree planting volunteers, Jennifer Dorrer and her son, Felix Kontanis, to learn about their experiences with PEC. Jennifer and Felix have lived in Warrenton for over 13 years, and Felix is a sophomore at Kettle Run High School. Both enjoy volunteering and have volunteered with other local nonprofits, including The Clifton Institute and Fauquier Education Farm. Jennifer first learned of PEC through our *Buy Fresh Buy Local* Program.

What do you like about living in Fauquier County?

Jennifer: When my husband and I considered moving here, the county’s focus on maintaining its agricultural character was very appealing to us. Growing up, our children loved being outside and experiencing nature, and Fauquier has been wonderful for that. I also like that there are many opportunities to volunteer and be involved.

Felix: For me, it is the sense of community and appreciation for the environment. Living in Fauquier County, we’re located near so many state and national parks and

other natural areas.

Why did you decide to sign up to plant trees?

Jennifer: I love volunteering with my family. I especially appreciate volunteer activities that put you in a position where you feel like the distance between your service and meeting a need is very short.

Felix: I’m hoping to complete at least 50 hours of volunteer service to earn a Board of Education Seal for Excellence at graduation. Beyond that, because I’m in school for seven hours a day, five days a week, volunteering has become a nice outlet – you don’t realize how much you need nature until you’re immersed in it.

What do you enjoy most about volunteering with PEC?

Jennifer: I like that even though I have lived here for many years, these volunteer opportunities enable me to travel to different farms and really see some of the backroads and preserved areas of the county. I also enjoy learning about other people’s conservation efforts to protect our watersheds.

Felix: I agree. It’s really nice to explore and learn more about where you live. It makes me feel like a part of the community. The educational aspect of the volunteer



Felix Kontanis and Jennifer Dorrer
Photo by Hugh Kenny

work is another reason I enjoy it.

I’ve heard you’re tracking how many trees you’ve planted...

Felix: My goal when I started volunteering was to plant 100 trees. At the time, it seemed impossible, but I have now planted over 120 trees.

Jennifer: That’s a combined effort. We work as a team.

What would you say to someone looking to get involved?

Felix: Set goals. It keeps you motivated, and then once you notice that you’re hitting benchmarks, it becomes even more rewarding. For 2023, my goal is 150 trees, and then the year after that, maybe 200 trees.

Jennifer: Don’t mind getting dirty! I consider that a benefit, to be honest with you.

Conserving a Piece of Heaven

Continued from cover

think it was really because of any of these people that we made the decision. We’re both into the environment. We just think it’s important that we conserve,” she said.

They also repeatedly tell me how this mostly conserved part of Fauquier County is restorative. “Even just driving down our driveway, to me, it’s very relaxing. You can feel your blood pressure drop,” Hans said.

Even so, wading through various uncertainties they had around conservation took time. There were appraisals, forestry provisions, consideration of what any future owner might want to do with the land, and planning the conservation easement around that. “It took a couple of

years to work through all of this. It was a process, there is a lot to take in. But the people at PEC were so wonderful about letting you know all of that, answering all the questions and explaining it all,” Hans said. “I would encourage people, if they’re thinking about conservation at all, to talk to PEC, because there’s really no pressure. Maggi was so patient.”

“Maggi” is Maggi Blomstrom, PEC’s conservation field representative who shepherded the Wachtmeisters through the process. “Belmont Hill Farm has been a conservation priority for PEC for many reasons. It has such high visibility across this entire part of the county and from a state scenic road, plus 230 acres of forest and 115 acres of pasture, all now protected. And within a one-mile radius, the farm is surrounded by roughly another 745 acres of protected land. So this easement enhances the conservation impacts of all of them,” she said.

With the easement

closed, Hans and Anne are now focusing on stewardship. After they delayed haying on about 50 acres last year as part of the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative, volunteers counted numerous red-winged blackbirds, eastern meadowlarks, and barn swallows, and more than a dozen other species. They are also part of a Clifton Institute study tracking the habitat of nesting American kestrels. And they are excited about the return of wild turkeys, quail, and “woodpeckers that you never used to see.”

After our conversation, I made my way back down the winding driveway, much more slowly than I ascended it. I took notice of the trees that line the old logging trail. I slowed as I passed the bluebird boxes perched above the fenceline. And, oh my! I stopped in my tracks at the sight of the vivid red, black, and white color blocks of the most stunning red-headed woodpecker — my first. Once out of the driveway and down the road, I marveled at the sight of a newborn calf and glanced up the hillside toward that wrap-around porch. I am grateful for the Wachtmeister’s conservation decision; it really is like driving through heaven here.



Belmont Hill Farm was one of seven Fauquier County properties conserved in 2022. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Pop Quiz

QUESTION

What is the average lifespan of the common earthworm (*Lumbricus terrestris*)?



ANSWER

d) Up to 6 years

These squiggly little annelids are vital to soil health and can vastly improve water filtration and soil aeration. They are known for their ability to transport nutrients and minerals and are an important food source for other critters. The more earthworms, the healthier the soil.

To encourage the presence of earthworms, increase their food reserves by planting cover crops, mulching, and manuring. Earthworms also prefer a soil pH of 6.5 and are fairly sensitive to acidic conditions. Your local Virginia Cooperative Extension office can help you test your soil for pH, as well as macro and micro nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and others.

Earthworms live where there is food, moisture, oxygen, favorable temperature, and appropriate pH. If you have all five of these elements, then your earthworms could live until the ripe old age of six!

Out&About

Showing up in Richmond to Support Data Center Reform



Photo by Hugh Kenny

▲ On Jan. 6, several PEC staff joined a coalition of organizations in Richmond to demonstrate support for data center reform. Unfortunately, neither the bills proposing that Virginia study environmental impacts of data centers, nor the bills preventing data centers near historic resources, made it through the General Assembly.

Charlottesville office open house



Photo by Montana Lanier Ruffner

▲ In January, our Albemarle/Charlottesville team welcomed partners, donors, and friends to our newly renovated Charlottesville office to discuss PEC's priorities on important regional issues. The area is facing significant development pressures and considering important long-term land use policy changes.

Solar on the Farm Workshop



Photo by Hugh Kenny

▲ On Jan. 27, about 70 community members attended an informational workshop PEC co-hosted with the Fauquier Farm Bureau, John Marshall Soil and Water Conservation District, the Virginia Cooperative Extension, and the Fauquier Climate Change Group. Energy providers and solar organizations shared information about incentive programs, grants, and loan opportunities to help farms and farm businesses improve energy efficiency and install small-scale solar to power their operations. Kevin Powers, of Powers Farm & Brewery in Midland, and Robert Willis, of the historic Clifton Farm in Rixeyville, shared their experiences installing and using solar.

The Sperryville Trail Network

Continued from cover

Joining the Effort

Once just a short trail in town, this pedestrian footpath has grown over the years into a true network of trails, both in its aggregate length and in its contribution to the fabric of the village. Here at PEC, we place strong value on public access to nature, knowing that it is critical to the health and well-being of people and communities. We also believe that when people experience nature, that exposure can help foster a deeper appreciation for the earth and build a mindset for conservation.

So when the Alliance approached PEC in late summer 2021, hoping to build upon the trail's considerable success to date, our Krebsner Fund provided funding to support the Alliance's vision for enhancing, expanding and formalizing the Thornton River Trail portion of the trail network. Augmenting more than \$52,000 the Sperryville Community Alliance raised locally, this support funded development of a trail management plan to guide trail improvements and community engagement opportunities.

I joined the PEC staff a few months later, and my subsequent collaboration with the Alliance and a newly formed Sperryville Trail Advisory Committee (STAC) was a crash course in the ripple effects of community-driven conservation efforts. The excitement was palpable at every STAC meeting, and after each one my mind swirled with lessons learned and new ideas about how the work we do on the ground matters most. When the Sperryville Trail Network Study and Invasive Species Management Plan was completed in November 2022, one thing was abundantly clear: the Thornton River's riparian area is our next priority.

Restoring Native Tree Canopy

To the untrained eye, the Sperryville Trail Network is a stress-free jaunt through a natural haven of plants and wildlife. The parallel river, lovingly nicknamed the Mighty Thornton, is not only beautiful, but it is also classified as a Class II Wild Trout Stream a mere few miles upstream. Its banks are packed with vegetation essential for filtering nutrients and pesticides, stabilizing streambanks and providing wildlife habitat. But...

Once you learn to recognize non-native invasive species that threaten native trees and the overall health of the buffers, you suddenly realize this riparian corridor is being overtaken. An inventory for the Invasive Species Management Plan found that almost 70% of all the vegetation along the Thornton River consisted of over 40 different non-native invasive plant species, including English ivy (*Hedera helix*), tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*), and multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*), which all appear on the state's list of priority invasive species.

"The popularity of the Sperryville network of trails is increasing by the year," said Clare Lindsay, who chairs the trail advisory committee and serves as vice president of the Rappahannock League



Sperryville Community Alliance President Kerry Suttan and community volunteers spent a rewarding day removing invasive plants from the trail alongside the Thornton River last fall. Photo by Kerry Suttan

of Environmental Protection's board of directors. "It's not only a favorite with locals, but also a lovely way for visitors to get a sense of our town and the beautiful landscape and waters that define it. We also hope that our trail stewardship will serve as an ongoing demonstration to residents and visitors of the importance of removing invasive species and re-establishing native species for the health of our local ecosystems," Lindsay said.

It Takes a Village

As Sperryville and the participating private landowners have so clearly shown, it takes a village to build a trail. Beginning with a grant from the Virginia Department of Forestry, the Alliance and the trail advisory committee are now working with volunteers and other partners to restore the Thornton River's riparian area. Last November, I joined over 20 volunteers for a trail work day to remove non-native invasive species, pick up trash, and plant trees donated by Friends of the Rappahannock. It was the kind of work that feels great — there's something so satisfying about visible progress — but we're certainly not done yet. There'll be other work days as the weather warms, and looking ahead to this fall, once the invasive plants are removed, PEC is planning a volunteer tree planting in collaboration with the many stakeholders involved with the Sperryville Trail Network.

"The Alliance served as a catalyst for the creation of the trails that make up the Sperryville Trail Network and provides for their enhancement, expansion, and maintenance. But none of these activities would be possible without the efforts of our partner organizations and the hundreds of volunteers who have helped clear invasives, replant natives, move mulch, install signs, oversee contractors, and contribute over \$100,000 in financial support," Suttan said.

The interwoven benefits of the Sperryville Trail Network, and the community energy surrounding it, always bring me back to that sense of place that drives so much conservation work. The generosity of the landowners, the passion of the all-volunteer Sperryville Community Alliance and its trail advisory committee, and the collaboration of many partner organizations all boil down to a commitment to protect and restore the places that we love — even, or maybe especially, with the recognition that there's a long trail, I mean road, ahead.



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On the Ground

Albemarle & Charlottesville

- The County has finished Phase 1 of its **Comprehensive Plan update**, and the resulting *Framework for an Equitable and Resilient Community* will serve as a guide in developing policy goals, objectives, and strategies in the next two phases. Running through the end of 2023, Phase 2 will review the current policy topic goals and objectives — such as land use, transportation, economic development, and natural resources — and begin the process of drafting new ones. A new Comprehensive Plan structure recently presented by county staff is vastly different from that of the 2015 comprehensive plan, consolidating 10 specific topical policy chapters from the 2015 comp plan into six much broader chapters. PEC has serious concerns about how this proposed structure will affect Rural Area protections.
- Albemarle County is also undertaking a multi-phase, multi-year **zoning ordinance rewrite**. Phase 1 includes completing the draft and final zoning ordinance evaluation report, and drafting new articles for general provisions, administration, permits and applications, and nonconforming uses, lots, and structures. During Phase 1, a public engagement plan has been completed and a public open house undertaken to introduce the community to the project and the ordinance evaluation. Phase 1 work sessions are slated to run from March through July 2023.

Clarke

- On Feb. 3, PEC **made comments at a Clarke County Planning Commission public hearing** about a special use permit (SUP) application for a Country Inn on the historic property of Carter Hall, formerly the site of Project Hope. Our concerns included unresolved issues of noise and light pollution and the introduction of a high intensity wedding venue at this rural location. With the majority of public comments against, and the applicant altering the application from the floor that morning, the Planning Commission voted to continue the public hearing through March 3, when the applicant requested deference for another month in order to respond to community concerns.
- PEC is working in partnership with the Clarke County Conservation Easement Authority to identify forested properties that qualify for conservation assistance from the federal Forest Legacy Program. This program **identifies and conserves environmentally important forest areas** that are threatened by conversion to non-forest uses. If you have a property on the Blue Ridge that is 50 acres or more with at least 75% forest, and you are interested in a conservation easement, contact Hallie Harriman at hharriman@pecva.org for more information.

Culpeper

- At its first meeting of the year, the Board of Supervisors voted to remove the **Brandy Station Technology Zone**, an outdated tax incentive that was attracting inappropriate data center developments to a historic, agricultural commu-

nity. PEC worked with local community leaders and organizations to raise awareness about this issue and provided comments at the hearing.

- In February, the Board of Supervisors adopted a **Solar Ordinance** that adds many necessary protections to reduce or mitigate the negative impacts of utility-scale solar on rural farms and forests, including a 300-acre limit on utility-scale projects. PEC provided comments on the ordinance and spoke to supervisors about our position that Virginia’s transition to clean energy must include small-scale distributed solar and solar located on marginal lands rather than supplanting the environmental and human benefits of working farms and forests.
- The Planning Commission voted for the third time to recommend denial of the **Maroon Solar** application. PEC, community organizations, and of the residents adjacent to the project have repeatedly raised concerns about the increased flood risk posed by the proposal’s impervious surfaces in an already flood-prone area. PEC also expressed concerns about loss of forestland, risk of sedimentation due to the highly-erodible soils on site, and the cumulative impacts of multiple utility-scale solar projects in the same watershed, referring to the previously approved Greenwood Solar and the proposed NorthRidge Solar project. Maroon has since withdrawn its application, but plans to reapply at a later date.
- The **2023 Comprehensive Plan update** is complete and was adopted by the Board of Supervisors on March 7. PEC has been very encouraged by many changes the Board has adopted to protect and showcase Culpeper’s agricultural economy, the new Culpeper State Park, and historic Brandy Station.

Fauquier

- At a Jan. 10 public hearing, the Town Council unanimously voted to withdraw its request for a **Boundary Line Adjustment**, but indicated that this action would not preclude individual applicants from applying to be incorporated into Town. Such an effort would raise many of the same questions related to zoning authority, revenues and service obligations of the Town and County.
- After a Feb. 14 public hearing that ended after 2 a.m., the Warrenton Town Council voted to approve the proposed **Amazon data center in Warrenton**. In a historic showing of community opposition, over 500 community members attended and close to 130 spoke. PEC will continue to partner with community groups to raise awareness of our concerns about this project and data center development overall, including the energy infrastructure proposed by Dominion to serve the approved site, anticipated data center proposals in Warrenton enabled by it, and various efforts at the state level that could affect the data center industry’s impacts.

Greene

- In January, we submitted grant proposals to the Natural Resources Conservation Service for **agricultural land easements on two farms on the border of Greene County** — a 274-acre farm in Greene and a 564-acre farm across the

line in Orange County. If secured, these grants will effectively conserve over 800 acres of valuable farmland under threat of commercial and residential development along the Highway 29 corridor.

- The Ruckersville Advisory Committee continues to support its **Ruckersville Area Plan** by pursuing safety and access opportunities outlined in the Jefferson Area Bike and Pedestrian Plan. County planning staff presented a final draft of the Comprehensive Plan to the Planning Commission on Feb. 18. PEC has supported the vision so far and has advocated that zoning districts intended to target economic development be located within existing growth-designated areas.

Loudoun

- A **Purchase of Development Rights (PDR)** program was briefly discussed at the Dec. 13 meeting of the Finance, Government, Operations & Economic Development Committee. PEC and 14 other partner organizations subsequently submitted a letter supporting such a program. County staff do not anticipate bringing a full PDR program proposal to the Board for consideration until later this year.
- The Planning Commission has held its second **public hearing on the Zoning Ordinance rewrite**, covering chapters not addressed last August. PEC has provided input directly and jointly with partners, suggesting changes to the draft that will better fulfill the vision of the Comprehensive Plan. We are scheduling individual meetings with planning commissioners in coming weeks. Several more work sessions are scheduled through the beginning of May.
- PEC has been providing input on the **Prime Soils and Cluster Subdivision zoning amendment**, through in depth presentations to planning commissioners and meetings with County board members. We will support a Board-appointed working group charged with recommending draft changes to help resolve concerns about impacts to future conservation easements.
- The Board of Supervisors recently approved a substantial increase to the County’s **conservation easement assistance program** income cap from \$150,000 to \$500,000. PEC provided a letter of support and is happy to share that this change will empower more landowners to fully participate in conservation easements.

Madison

- The **County’s Comprehensive Plan update** is underway. A committee of residents and representatives from the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors are first considering a revised vision statement and discussing broad topic areas for inclusion in the plan. PEC is following their work and will look for opportunities to contribute to the process and to help engage residents during the public input period later this spring.
- The saga of a Richmond developer’s proposal to purchase, renovate and repurpose the **historic Criglersville school** as a boutique hotel and wedding venue continues. After the Board of Supervisors declined to execute a contract to

purchase the property, the developer sued to either force the sale or secure compensation. When the developer first proposed a plan for the property last year, PEC was pleased to see an attempt to save the historic school building, but raised questions about water supply, noise, guest capacity, and potential negative impacts on the village, as the proposal called for construction of additional lodging. Community residents voiced similar concerns in a series of public meetings in late 2022. At this time, it is unclear what the developer would do with the property if his lawsuit is successful, as it would have to be rezoned in order to operate a hotel.

Orange

➤ The latest revision to the proposed **Wilderness Crossing development** reduced the number of homes, increased the commercial space and added a variety of industrial uses by-right. Our Freedom of Information Act request revealed that County officials have signed non-disclosure agreements with data center developers. As proposed, Wilderness Crossing could be a sprawling subdivision of 5,000 homes, a massive data center campus requiring new power transmission lines, or some combination of both. PEC and the Wilderness Battlefield Coalition continue to urge the Planning Commission to address unresolved concerns about mercury contamination, the strain on the County’s water supply, and impacts to traffic, schools, and the historic Wilderness Battlefield.

Rappahannock

➤ Two of PEC’s long-time partner organizations in Rappahannock County have officially joined forces! As of Feb. 1, the local nonprofit Rappahannock Friends and Lovers of Our Watersheds (RappFLOW) is joining the **Rappahannock League for Environmental Protection (RLEP)**, to create a single nonprofit organization under the RLEP name.

➤ The Sperryville Community Alliance, a local nonprofit and PEC partner on the Sperryville Trail Network, is working with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources to potentially **expand and update the Sperryville Historic District**. PEC continues to monitor the progress of the project.



UPCOMING Events

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

Plant Trees With Us

When ➤ March 16 - April 22
Where ➤ Clarke, Culpeper, Orange, and Rappahannock counties

Help us improve water quality and wildlife habitat by joining our Headwater Stream Initiative and Potomac Planting Program teams to plant native trees and shrubs! This March and April, we’ll need a lot of volunteers to help us scalp grass, dig holes, pound stakes and plant some 1,700 native plants across five properties this spring – at Clermont Farm in Clarke County, along a tributary to the Hidens Branch-Mountain Run watershed in Culpeper County, at Hackley’s Country Store in Rappahannock County, and at the J Team Dairy farm in Orange County. Learn more and sign up to volunteer at: pecva.org/events.



Photo by Pete Smith

Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative Informational Talk

When ➤ March 26 • 6 - 7 PM
Where ➤ Long Branch Historic House and Farm, Boyce

Learn more about this financial incentive program for farmers who implement delayed haying and rotational grazing. These bird-friendly practices encourage an abundance and diversity of bird species. For more information, visit: visitlongbranch.org/speaker-series/

Building Walkable Piedmont Towns

When ➤ March 31
Where ➤ The Refinery, Culpeper

PEC is hosting a workshop for local community leaders, government staff, and stakeholders of Fauquier, Culpeper, and Rappahannock counties. The workshop focuses on giving local towns and villages tools to build consensus and capacity for implementing their walking, streetscape, trail and traffic calming projects. Gordonsville and Hillsboro town officials will share their success stories as part of the program. Learn more at and register at: pecva.org/events

20th Annual Bluebell Walk

When ➤ April 16 • 11 AM - 1 PM
Where ➤ Bonny Brook Farm in Catlett

This family-friendly event, sponsored by PEC’s Julian Scheer Fauquier Land Conservation Fund, is a delightful chance to walk amongst a beautiful streamside field of Virginia’s iconic and ephemeral bluebells on a private conserved property. Along the walk, hear from experts on beavers, native meadow and riparian habitats for birds, butterflies, and other critters, invasive species removal, and more! Wear waders and splash around in the brisk Cedar Run waters on the way! Learn more and register at pecva.org/events.

Rivanna Riverfest

When ➤ April 30
Where ➤ Rivanna River Company, Charlottesville

Celebrate the beautiful Rivanna River at this annual family-friendly tradition. Come for the races on land and on the water, educational programs, volunteer opportunities, food, music, and fun. Learn more about this event, organized by the Rivanna Conservation Alliance and many partners, at: rivannariver.org/rivanna-riverfest/

Back to the Basics – Encouraging Biodiversity Throughout Clarke!

When ➤ May 10 • 5:30 - 7:30 PM
Where ➤ Long Branch Historic House and Farm, Boyce

PEC’s Clarke County Land Conservation Fund is hosting a program focused on land management techniques that enhance plant, insect, and wildlife biodiversity. Charlotte Lorick, Naturalist & Biodiversity Management Team Coordinator at the Oak Spring Garden Foundation, will be presenting. More information coming soon to: pecva.org/events.

Volunteer at the Community Farm

When ➤ Spring! Summer! Fall!
Where ➤ Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows

Spring planting is already underway at PEC’s Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows, and that means there are lots of ways volunteers can help us reach our 2023 goal of donating 50,000 pounds of produce and eggs to Loudoun Hunger Relief. Now through November, we need volunteers to plant and transplant veggies, herbs, and fruit, feed our small flock of laying hens, collect eggs, and harvest and sort ripe produce. We started the Community Farm in 2019 to help meet the needs of food insecure communities in Loudoun County. To learn more about volunteering and sign up, visit: pecva.org/farmvolunteer.



Photo by Sophia Chapin

PEC Annual Meeting

When ➤ Saturday, June 10
Where ➤ Meadowkirk at Delta Farm, Middleburg

Save the Date! Join us for a fun, informative day in a beautiful setting. Catch up with friends, participate in a workshop and learn more about local efforts to build a stronger, more sustainable region. Registration information will be available soon. Contact Montana Lanier Ruffner at mlanier@pecva.org with questions.



Photo by Hugh Kenny

Dear Friends,

As the General Assembly 2023 session winds down, Virginia enters a critical period when all 100 seats in the House of Delegates and all 40 seats in the Senate will be up for election. Much of the session seemed to be influenced by that impending moment; debates and votes on land conservation, community land use planning and housing, water quality, transportation, and energy all seemed in large part designed to position members for the elections. Even bills to study the impacts of the unprecedented increase in data centers and the energy they consume were voted down under enormous pressure from Amazon and the data center industry, which are, along with Dominion Energy, the largest contributors to political candidates. Budget negotiations over spending plans that were approved last year stalemated over election year issues, despite an unprecedented surplus of revenue. On this front, the one piece of good news is that higher levels of conservation funding remain in place.

Now, more than ever before, it is critical to be bold in our vision for the future and vote for the policy priorities that move us forward. PEC's role has long been to articulate the public benefits of improved local and regional planning, including around energy and transportation infrastructure, and investments in conservation and restoration. We urge you, in conversations with family, friends, neighbors and colleagues, to advocate on behalf of the Piedmont's lands and waters and for stronger, more sustainable communities.

In late December 2022, the PEC Board of

Directors approved a new strategic plan, which we'll be rolling out over the coming months, that is aligned with this moment of opportunity. Building on the foundation of 50 years of community-based planning and conservation, we can continue to improve our cities, towns, villages and growth areas in ways that are inclusive, sustainable, and resilient, while also accelerating conservation of rural areas and restoring the health of soils, waters and forests. The combination of federal and state funding opportunities has never been more supportive for projects and programs that will help us achieve these goals.

But huge challenges are already before us. Among them is the explosive growth of data centers and Amazon's announcement of a \$35 billion investment in more, which together bring increased pressure for land and for energy infrastructure expansion. Not only are we facing the siting of tens of millions of square feet of data centers, but peak electricity demands are forecasted to double or triple in the next 15 years. No matter the source of electricity, there will be dramatic expansion in transmission and distribution power lines. All of us need to work together to push for a cleaner, well-planned, and carefully sited renewable



PEC staff joined a coalition of organizations in Richmond to demonstrate support for data center reform.

energy system, one that seizes the opportunity for rooftop residential solar, small-scale solar generation to support farms, and the reuse of parking lots, large commercial rooftops, brownfields and other impaired sites as a bigger part of the solution.

In all of our work, PEC will continue to collaborate with other conservation and environmental partners and highlight the needs and opportunities within our increasingly diverse communities. I look forward to discussing our strategic plan in detail with you in the coming months.

Sincerely,

Chris G. Miller

Chris Miller, President



Photo by Matt Ha



A MEMBERSHIP NEWSLETTER OF THE PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL SPRING 2023



INSIDE

South River conservation corridor; meet volunteers Jennifer Dorrer and Felix Kontanis; PEC field reps On the Ground across the region; upcoming events, and more

Spring in Scottsville, Albemarle County. Photo by Hugh Kenny

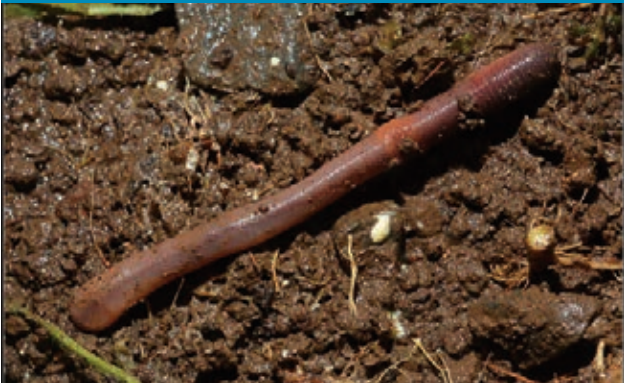
Pop Quiz

QUESTION

What is the average lifespan of the common earthworm (*Lumbricus terrestris*)?

- a) Up to 6 days
- b) Up to 6 weeks
- c) Up to 6 months
- d) Up to 6 years

ANSWER ON PAGE 4



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