



The Piedmont View

A MEMBERSHIP NEWSLETTER OF THE PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

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Clouds of Data and Pollution: Gas Plants at Data Centers Threaten Public Health

By Jessica Edington, Publications Assistant

“It was unlike anything I’ve ever seen before,” said Hugh Kenny about his first time visiting the Vantage VA2 data center in Sterling, Virginia. As The Piedmont Environmental Council’s multimedia specialist, Hugh has photographed and filmed dozens of data centers in Virginia over the last seven years. But the Vantage site has something none of the other facilities do: on-site natural gas turbines for power.

Diesel backup generators are a common fixture on most data center campuses, intended to kick in and operate temporarily during unplanned power outages. But the Vantage VA2 data center uses a “bring your own power” model, running its eight natural gas turbines 24/7 to power the energy-hungry equipment inside. Vantage is the first of its kind in the region, but because data centers must wait years to get connected to a power grid that can’t yet accommodate their energy demands, PEC fears more may be soon to come, causing rippling health impacts for already vulnerable populations.

Concerned about potential public health impacts to the residential communities around facilities like Vantage, PEC commissioned an independent study by EmPower Analytics Group to model air pollution created by these turbines operating in populated areas.

The findings of the study are “a wake-up

call for the entire region,” says PEC Director of Land Use Julie Bolthouse. EmPower Analytics Group found that, when operating at the maximum permitted emissions, the Vantage VA2 data center could result in \$265 million to \$495 million in health-related damages and 17-33 additional premature deaths over the next five

years across the impacted region. People living miles away from the data center can be affected by the pollution; in the case of Vantage VA2, its emissions reach more than 2.5 million people, including those living in neighboring counties and parts of the broader Washington, D.C. metropolitan region.

Emissions from Vantage VA2 and from intermittent use of backup diesel generators at multiple other nearby data centers have a cumulative impact on air quality — and if on-site gas turbines for data centers become a common solution to grid connection delays,



Vantage VA2 data center in Sterling, VA.
Photo from Loudoun County online mapping tool

the combined air pollution will degrade Virginia’s air quality for decades.

A growing trend

Utilities like Dominion Energy can’t keep up with the skyrocketing demand from new data centers. In Dominion’s territory alone, the total energy requested by planned data centers has reached over 70 gigawatts, a jaw-dropping figure that could power all the homes in Virginia nearly four times over and is triple the size of the current grid.

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Through creativity and collaboration, a Greene County farm stays in the family for the fourth generation

By Elizabeth Ransom, Media & Public Relations Specialist

When I parked my car near the large red barn at Long Acre Farm, I heard a chorus of cows. Hundreds of their expectant faces were lined up along the fence in the nearby field. Farmer Dustin Watson was heading my way wearing faded Wrangler jeans, a red button-down shirt and a baseball hat emblazoned with the Long Acre Farm

logo. WVTF radio reporter Sandy Hausman, getting out of her car at the same time, asked if the cows might be hungry. They probably recognized him? Yes, definitely, he said.

Sandy held up a microphone to capture the sound. While she interviewed Dustin, Dustin’s wife Gillian walked over from the house to say hello. Visibly pregnant, she moved gingerly over the gravel road in her sandals, pulling a long button-down blue shirt over her black dress to protect against the unseasonably cold wind. It was mid-May, but the temperature was in the 50s and storm clouds were darkening the sky. Gillian told me it had been a long journey

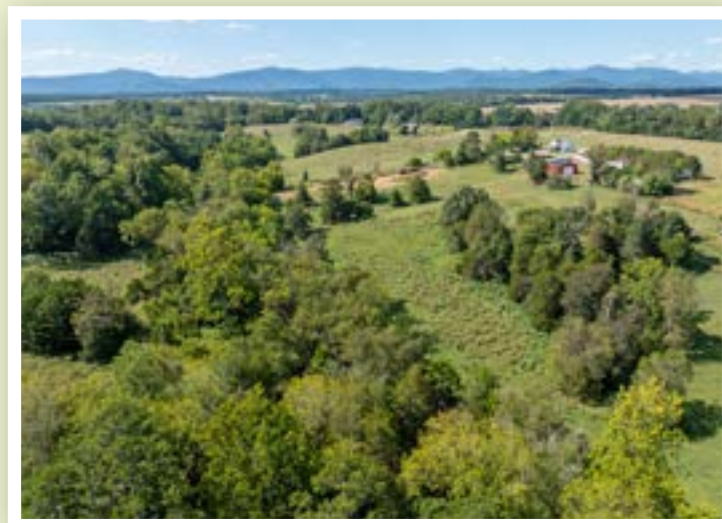
to this moment, with significant uncertainty about whether she and her husband would be able to hold onto his family farm.

Dustin always wanted to carry on the tradition as the fourth-generation family member to own the farm. His great-grandfather bought the farm in 1939, and it had passed down to his grandfather.

“It was just always something I had in the back of my mind,” he said. “At a young age, I thought: how am I going to do this?” In 2023, the farm was co-owned by his mother and his aunt, who needed to sell. But, as a young farmer, Watson did not have the money to buy out his aunt, and while she did not have plans to run the farm operation, she could not afford to give the farm away, either. The farm’s future was in jeopardy.

Long Acre Farm was facing a predicament that many working farms in Virginia face. According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, Virginia lost 488,000 acres of farmland between 2017 and 2022, more than in the previous 15 years. According to research from American Farmland Trust, about 300

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Long Acre Farm, Greene County.
Photo by Hugh Kenny

Troubles with Transmission

By Michael Barber, Senior Energy Infrastructure Policy Analyst

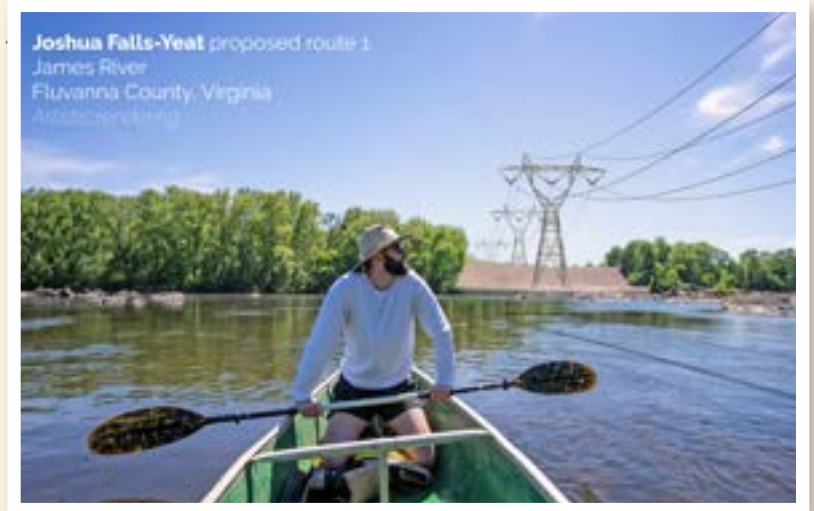
“This farm has been in our family for over 100 years. This powerline would destroy so much of what we’ve built here.”

Charlie Goodwin grew up along a bend in the James River in Buckingham County, Virginia. The family farm is a picture of the area that surrounds the upper James — beautiful stands of trees, gentle hills with crops that stretch out of sight, and quiet, cared-for farmhouses.

Charlie lives near Fredericksburg now, but returns to the farm frequently. His parents lease out land to a local farmer and run an Airbnb on the site. His sister has a beekeeping business on the property, and the family has partnered with the James River Batteau Company, which hosts dinners and events on the farm and offers historical boat tours of the Scottsville area.

The Goodwins’ place could be a poster child for Virginia’s rural economy — an active farm that hosts multiple long-standing family and local businesses, all with a backdrop of rich historical significance. The property and its neighbors were all part of Snowden, a sprawling 1700s estate along the James River once owned by Thomas Jefferson’s father. The Smithsonian has been out twice to search for artifacts and the original farmhouse.

But it’s unclear if this particular farm will still look the same in a few years’ time. Three months ago, Valley Link Transmission LLC, a joint venture between Dominion Energy and other utilities, revealed the area is within a possible route for what would be the largest transmission line built in the state in decades.



Michael Barber looks at the point where the proposed Valley Link transmission line would cross the James River in Buckingham and Fluvanna counties, depicted here in a 3D simulation.

Photo by Hugh Kenny

An energy superhighway

The project, named Joshua Falls-Yeat for the two substations it would connect, would stretch about 115 miles from Lynchburg to Culpeper. The line has multiple possible routes, but all of them would impact hundreds of property owners and clear 2,600+ acres of forests and farms to make way for a 200-foot right-of-way. Transmission towers as tall as 160 feet would dot the corridor every quarter mile — skyscrapers through an otherwise rural stretch of the Piedmont.

The line would also open the door to future development — the kind few could have anticipated just a few short months ago. Valley Link representatives themselves have referred to the project as an electrical backbone that would allow them to connect additional transmission lines and power plants throughout central Virginia. Some of the nine counties in the line’s path are already seeing that kind of development; just this March, Fluvanna’s Board of Supervisors approved a massive new gas plant near the county’s western edge. But for most of the region, the changes this line would bring are something no one asked for, and largely inconsistent with their local comprehensive plans.

Why it’s being proposed

So where did this transmission line come from?

Data centers seem to be perennial front page news in Virginia, and for good

reason. They consume massive amounts of electricity — as much as entire cities — and the industry’s power demand is a structural shift for our state. Despite a growing population, electricity demand in Virginia was essentially flat for most of the 2000s and 2010s, largely thanks to energy efficiency improvements in lighting and appliances.

But since 2020, Virginia’s electricity consumption has grown 23% and is expected to climb even faster, due almost entirely to data centers. Dominion Energy, the utility that owns most of the high voltage power lines in the state, revealed in February that it has received requests to serve data center customers totaling over 70 gigawatts — close to triple the current peak demand of the entire state.

All that energy has to come from somewhere. The high-voltage transmission network, which moves electricity from power plants to population centers across the eastern United States, is the interstate highway system our grid relies on. Unlike homes and most other businesses, which are served by an intermediate network of low-voltage distribution lines (like the kind on wooden poles you might see in your neighborhood), data centers tie directly into this interstate system. Their power demands are driving an unprecedented expansion of this network, with Dominion reporting over 250 transmission-related projects planned or under construction in Virginia

as of October 2025.

This buildout is one of the greatest threats to public and private lands in the state. Like an interstate highway, the impacts of the lines spider-web out to impact all of the surrounding land. The Joshua Falls-Yeat project that threatens the Goodwin family farm “has the potential to trigger development on either side, with on ramps for new generation and off ramps for data centers and other energy intensive uses. It could affect hundreds of thousands of acres,” says Piedmont Environmental Council President Chris Miller.

Other major projects in the pipeline

- The **Morrisville-Wishing Star line** filed with the state in late winter would add a new line on monopoles, some almost 200 feet tall, between Fauquier and Loudoun County, along a route that already hosts significant transmission infrastructure. The new lines would further burden residents and historical resources in the area, such as the nearby Manassas National Battlefield Park.
- Dominion recently proposed an upgrade to the existing **Charlottesville-Gordonsville** line that travels 15 miles through the Southwest Mountains Rural Historic District and the Journey through Hallowed Ground National Heritage Area. The current 50-foot-tall wooden poles sit largely below the tree line, but Dominion proposes replacing them with steel towers up to 150 feet tall in order to string another transmission line to them. These would be visible for miles through an area that has been federally recognized for its historic character and scenic value.
- Yet another utility company, FirstEnergy, is planning a similar rebuild project for a line that crosses the Shenandoah National Park between **Page County and Sperryville**. Its existing wooden poles would be replaced with steel towers as tall as 115 feet, which would have significant visual impacts on the Sperryville Historic District. The town of Sperryville is a critical gateway to Shenandoah National Park and

Skyline Drive’s most visited entrance. Tourism at the park is an economic engine for the region, and the scenic and historic character of the surrounding communities is critical to the area’s draw. Just last year the National Park Service estimated that park visitation boosted the local economy by \$175 million.

The costs

The scale of this buildout is massive. Dominion plans to spend as much as \$3 billion a year on these projects for the foreseeable future, almost four times what it was spending at the beginning of the decade. Very few of these transmission projects would be required if not for data center growth. In fact, in 2024 Dominion reported to the Virginia State Corporation Commission in its Integrated Resource Plan that over 75% of their transmission project costs were either solely or partially driven by new data center energy demand.

But the data center industry isn’t footing that bill. A disproportionate share of costs are passed on to residential ratepayers, even for the lines Dominion ascribes solely to data centers. Burying these lines underground through sensitive areas is one way to reduce their impacts on communities and natural resources, but that can be many times more expensive, which is a tough pill to swallow when residents across the state are already on the hook for the bill.

PEC is hard at work trying to shift that burden off everyday Virginians and back to the data centers driving these projects. The State Corporation Commission regulates how costs for transmission are allocated across the commonwealth. PEC has been active in three cases before the commission over the past year arguing for fairer cost allocation, and we’ll be intervening in several more in 2026.

This pace of growth is entirely new for our grid, and it demands a new approach to how we build and pay for it. The richest companies in the world are driving it, and it’s only fair that they pay to build these projects in ways that respect the communities who host them. It’s worth fighting for a transmission system that protects the special places in our state, whether that’s a historic area designated by Congress, or a farm that’s been in the family for 100 years.



PEC, along with nine other partners across the state, convened a press conference at Historic Germanna to share the news that Preservation Virginia has named the nine-county corridor targeted for Valley Link’s proposed 765 kilovolt transmission line project to its list of Virginia’s Most Endangered Historic Places for 2026.

Photo by Hugh Kenny

Piedmont Memorial Overlook: the view that inspired a lifelong commitment

By Elizabeth Ransom, Media & Public Relations Specialist

A flash of blue soared over my car windshield. What kind of bird creates a vivid cerulean streak? Was that an Eastern bluebird? Or was it an indigo bunting, the eponymous bird I later heard chattering in the treetops?

I was en route to the Piedmont Environmental Council's Piedmont Memorial Overlook, which has a view I have always cherished. Located atop a rocky outcrop on the eastern side of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Fauquier County, the overlook is embraced by the Shenandoah River, Sky Meadows State Park, and U.S. routes 50 and 17. Its view offers a dizzying panorama of the most protected landscape in the eastern United States. In the foreground, looking southeast, 1,860 acres of Sky Meadows State Park spreads before you, with dense woodlands, undulating green pastures and a cluster of historic structures that harken to the 1700s. The soft curves of Lost Mountain — part of the Crooked Run Valley, extending toward Delaplane — appear across U.S. Route 17.

That day, the PEC habitat team was leading an outreach event to educate the community about unique plants and wildlife at the overlook. As I got out of my car, an Appalachian cottontail hopped into the forest in front of me.



Along the trail to the top, a common yellowthroat (an uncommonly handsome warbler known as the “yellow bandit” because of its black mask) peered from the safety of a tree branch. Gazing at a striped Jack-in-the-pulpit in the understory, I thought about the Sioux who once lived here and would have witnessed these same sights. The people of the Manahoac Confederacy lived in this region for centuries, managing the landscape with fire to create hunting grounds and fertile soil.

After a breathless hike gaining 1,000 feet in elevation, I arrived at the overlook and my eye traveled along the low stone wall to the far end of the meadow. Birds clustered in the limbs of three honey locust trees, eating the white flowers and creating an intricate melody with their distinct calls. An uninterrupted verdant landscape floated beyond the meadow.

What a romantic spot! I recalled a story Abby Keffer recently shared with us about a visit to the overlook.

“After a long hike on a sweltering June afternoon, I was tempted to skip the extra stretch to the overlook — one of Peter’s and my favorite spots — and head back to our car. Fortunately for Peter and his carefully laid plan, a friendly passerby overheard me and chimed in, ‘You made it this far, how could you possibly miss the overlook?’ Of course, they were right. We got engaged just a few minutes later, surrounded by the beauty of the Piedmont, and the overlook is now an even more special place for us.”

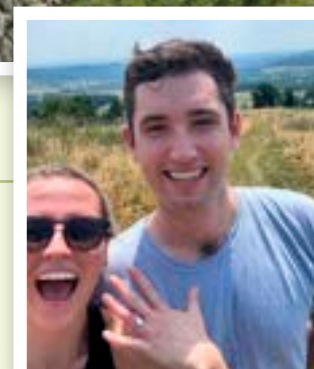
I reflected on how this view, which inspires joy and lifelong commitment, came to be.

In the late 1990s, the area risked

Eastern Bluebird.
Photo by Elizabeth Ransom



Panoramic view at Piedmont Memorial Overlook. Photo by Elizabeth Ransom



Abby Keffer and Peter Badenhausem.
Photo courtesy Abby Keffer

being changed forever by several development projects. Consequently, the Preservation Alliance of Virginia nominated the area from Ashby Gap toward Paris as one of Virginia’s most endangered, calling it “the quintessential Virginia vista.”

In 2000, with support from local families and foundations, PEC purchased 1,235 acres adjoining Sky Meadows State Park, and shortly thereafter, transferred nearly 450 acres to the U.S. Department of the Interior to enhance the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, which passes through the park. PEC then permanently protected the remainder of the land, now managed by Ovoka Farms, from development through a conservation easement. These significant conservation efforts provide protection to the Goose Creek watershed.

The Piedmont Memorial Overlook provides a place of reflection to commemorate community members who spent their lives working to protect this landscape. Thanks to PEC’s wildlife habitat restoration, many native plants, bees, animals and migratory birds thrive at the overlook. With support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the PEC team eliminated non-native plants and planted native wildflower species on the 16-acres of meadow. PEC manages the

meadow using prescribed fire, late winter mowing and invasive species monitoring, and the property serves as a demonstration site for landowners interested in viewing habitat restoration practices.

For the thousands of people who visit the Piedmont Memorial Overlook every year, the view of the protected landscape is a cherished destination: the crowning achievement of a hike through the woods surrounded by the sights and sounds of wildlife. And for others, like Abby and Peter, the overlook is just the beginning.

The Piedmont Memorial Overlook is located in Paris, Virginia, about an hour west by car from Washington, DC. You can access it via hiking trails at Sky Meadows State Park and the Appalachian Trail. *Note: There is a fee to enter and park at Sky Meadows.*

Knowledge Nook

How to save energy this summer

With energy costs in Virginia rising faster than anywhere else in the country thanks to rapid data center buildout, it’s more impactful than ever this summer to reduce your home’s energy use — and, in turn, your electric bill.

Here are some ways you can save energy this summer:

- **Close curtains and blinds on south-facing windows.** Bonus: darker or “blackout” curtains and shades will block out more light and keep your home cooler.
- **Avoid using the oven, which generates a lot of heat, and instead try summer recipes on the stovetop or in a slow cooker, toaster oven or microwave.** Bonus: keep the coils of your refrigerator and freezer clean so they can run efficiently.
- **Set the thermostat higher when you leave the house or go on vacation.** Bonus: installing a smart thermostat lets you control the temperature even when you’re away.
- **Unplug appliances you don’t use regularly to prevent “phantom loads” from drawing electricity.** Bonus: consider plugging electronics into power strips that can be turned off so you don’t have to unplug everything.
- **Lower your water heater’s maximum temperature to 120 degrees Fahrenheit.** Bonus: Consider using the cold cycle for laundry and taking cooler, shorter showers.
- **Replace incandescent bulbs with LEDs, which use up to 90% less energy.** Bonus: if you need to replace a larger appliance, look for Energy Star products that use less electricity.
- **Clean air filters once a month and have your heating and cooling systems serviced once a year.** Bonus: make sure your furniture is not blocking any air vents.
- **Watch the “Energy” playlist at [youtube.com/@PiedmontEnvironmentalCouncil](https://www.youtube.com/@PiedmontEnvironmentalCouncil) to see easy home projects you can do to reduce your energy bills.** Bonus: sign up for **Solarize Piedmont** through July 15 for a free home solar assessment!



Photo by Kelly Sikkema, Unsplash

2026 General Assembly Takeaways

By Cindy Sabato, Co-Director of Outreach & Communications

The dust has finally settled in Richmond, and those of us who love the Piedmont have a lot to celebrate. With the 2026 General Assembly session (mostly) behind us, it's clear that the collective voice of the Piedmont is being heard. The fact that the budget remains a work in progress is evidence that we've begun shifting perspectives among the state's lawmakers. Overall, this year's outcomes mark a significant step toward protecting our rural character while building a modern, sustainable Virginia.

An Energy Revolution in Our Own Backyard

One of the brightest spots this year was what Piedmont Environmental Council Senior Energy and Climate Advisor Ashish Kapoor calls "transformative" progress on distributed generation — energy produced right where it's used.

The Distributed Generation Expansion Act is a massive win for our landscape. It significantly increases the solar we can build on rooftops and parking lots, and even requires Dominion Energy — which has historically sidelined these options — to build 1 gigawatt of solar on "built" environments like brownfields and parking lots.

"That means people will benefit more immediately, and we'll get energy online more quickly. Most importantly, it means there's that much less solar we need to build over our forests and farms," Ashish said.

The breakthrough wasn't just technical; it was human. Ashish recalls "years of tough, sometimes emotional" debates with other advocates and utilities to find common ground, which inspired his recent TEDx Warrenton talk. "We have to trust the intentions of the people around the room, and that comes from the face-to-face conversations, the field trips to see what's really happening on the ground and coming through those difficult moments together."

That collaboration led to consensus building on a bill defining agrivoltaics, which PEC developed with Virginia Farm Bureau. The new law sets the stage for a subsequent workgroup to define incentives. And when our existing solar is combined with the state's new battery storage requirements — another legislative win — the result is a more efficient grid that reduces pressure for

intrusive new transmission lines through rural areas. In the end, Ashish said "it feels like we finally won a round with the big utilities. There's hope that comes from all of this."

Bringing (some) Balance to Data Centers

Meanwhile, "the growing awareness of data center impacts on our land, water and grid finally forced legislators to act," said PEC Director of Land Use Julie Bolthouse. "While we saw only small moves toward accountability, that legislators felt enough pressure to take action was the real story. We didn't get the critical bill we wanted, which was state oversight, and we didn't get full disclosure of water needs, but we did secure some transparency in the form of periodic water usage reports and requirements for noise studies near residential areas. Utilities now also have to say how many substations and how much voltage they will need. These are all moves toward the transparency we've long advocated for," she said.

Another sign the conversation has changed is that the Virginia budget is still being held up in a stalemate between the House and Senate over the state's data center tax exemption, which ballooned to \$1.9 billion last year and is projected to increase again this year. PEC has been vocal that these companies shouldn't be subsidized by Virginia taxpayers. Sen. Louise Lucas and the Senate have held the line, while the governor and House leadership are unwilling to end the exemptions, despite legal authority to do so through the budget process. The legislature reconvenes this month for another special session focused on the budget.

The legislature also passed a "demand-response" bill, which creates



Governor Spanberger visited PEC's agrivoltaics demonstration site (pictured here) in June to sign a bill defining agrivoltaics, setting the stage for collaboration between agriculture and renewable energy. Photo by Hugh Kenny

a path for a program incentivizing data centers to shift their energy use during peak hours without using on-site fossil fuels. PEC is working to get a seat on the state working group to ensure this has real teeth and doesn't end up costing other ratepayers to implement.

Smarter Growth and Affordable Housing

Our mission to promote vibrant, walkable communities took a giant leap forward with two major housing wins centered on creating access to affordable options.

First, Virginia officially legalized Accessory Dwelling Units statewide, reflecting "a rising sense that people need options that don't involve division of land for more lots, but options for come-back children and parents," said PEC Senior Advisor John McCarthy. "This kind of 'hidden density' provides flexible options without carving up our rural farms into new subdivisions."

Second, the "Faith in Housing" bill now makes it easier for churches and nonprofits to build housing on their own land, provided it's near existing transportation. "This responds to a growing need for variety in our communities and solutions that focus on affordable, workforce housing," John said.

But PEC stood firm against a handful of bills that, in the name of more affordable housing, attempted to bypass local agency to accelerate development. "Local input and decision-making are the best tools our communities have to prevent bad projects from moving forward, and a critical part of the process," John said.

Ultimately, these housing wins are also conservation wins. "Compact, transit-served communities can provide a high quality of life for people without negatively impacting our environment or natural resources," John said.

PEC's Foundational Mission

At the heart of PEC's mission is permanent land conservation — the essential platform for protecting clean water, restoring wildlife habitat, creating public access to nature and strengthening the Piedmont's rural economy. This year's session didn't net much forward movement, but PEC Director of Conservation Mike Kane

says that maintaining our best tool, the Virginia Land Preservation Tax Credit, was a win.

For 25 years, this program has helped protect over one million acres, and it's recognized as one of the most successful land conservation programs in the country. "The fact that there were no changes to it reflects a growing recognition of the significant public benefit conserved lands provide all Virginians — clean water, productive soils for the agricultural economy, and places for outdoor recreation," Mike said.

Other top priorities, like funding for agricultural best management practices and the acceptance of Oak Hill in Loudoun County as a state park, are currently tied to the data center tax exemption stalemate. "While BMP funding looks solid, Oak Hill remains in play. We are still strongly advocating for the state to accept Oak Hill as a state park and hope the budget will bring a resolution to that in 2026," Mike says.

Meanwhile, the General Assembly gave us four bills targeting invasive species. "These bills reflect a growing awareness of the hazards of non-native invasive species. Think about tree of heaven: that draws the spotted lanternfly, which is wiping out our local vineyards. Bringing new tools to this fight is essential for our natural world and our agricultural economy," Mike said.

Finally, we are pleased to see the General Assembly reject changes the governor sought to make to a bill that discourages utilities from attempting to take conserved lands for transmission lines. By requiring utilities to repay the tax credits and local tax benefits associated with protected property, the bill would ensure these lands aren't seen as cheap paths for development. "It highlights that for any conserved lands to be taken is offensive to the state's priorities for conservation and the public benefits they provide. These lands are protected for a reason," Mike said.

Looking Ahead

While the debate over data center tax exemptions continues into the summer budget negotiations, and various other items tied to it hang in the balance, momentum is on our side. This progress wouldn't be possible without the advocacy and support of PEC community members across the state.



A debate over whether to eliminate the sales tax exemption for data centers — which reached nearly \$2 billion last year — has stalled the General Assembly's adoption of a state budget. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Through creativity and collaboration, a Greene County farm stays in the family for the fourth generation

Continued from cover

million acres of farmland across the United States will change hands in the next two decades. As farmers age and retire, about a third of agricultural land in the United States faces an uncertain future. Due to rising costs, development pressures and declining interest, farms like Long Acre are often sold and developed. Between 2017 and 2022, 10% of all Virginia farms ceased to operate.

Watson did not want Long Acre Farm to become one of those statistics. "My grandfather bought this farm in 1939, and this is where he wanted his legacy to be," he said. "I ended up calling the extension agent here in Greene, and she told me about a new program with The Piedmont Environmental Council that is purchasing conservation easements on working farms

in the Rappahannock watershed."

That program was the U.S. Department of Agriculture: Natural Resources Conservation Service's Agricultural Land Easement, or ALE, program, designed to help landowners like the Watsons, land trusts like PEC, and other entities work together to protect working farms through conservation easements that limit land conversion and nonagricultural uses. The program provides grant funding that allows the purchase of the conservation easement on the property. NRCS Virginia currently manages over 157 conservation easements protecting over 21,000 acres.

"Protecting working farms while keeping them in production is central to our mission at NRCS," said NRCS Virginia State Conservationist

Dr. Edwin Martinez. "This easement ensures this land remains a productive operation while also delivering important water quality and conservation benefits. Through strong partnerships, we are able to keep producers on the land and protect resources that matter to communities across Virginia and the Chesapeake Bay watershed."

To help keep the cattle farm in Dustin Watson's family and protected forever by a conservation easement, PEC led a complex process among



Farmer Dustin Watson at Long Acre Farm. Photo by Gillian Bowman

partnering organizations. American Farmland Trust loaned Watson the money to buy out his aunt, while PEC secured funds from the ALE program and the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation to purchase the conservation easement once the farm was in his name. Then, Watson used the money from the sale of the easement to pay off the loan. In early April, this whole process wrapped up after more than two years, and Long Acre Farm was officially protected by an easement held jointly by PEC and the Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District.

This protects the property's important natural resources. Twenty-four acres at Long Acre are state-designated "prime farmland" and 136 acres are "farmland of statewide importance." Long Acre has 86 acres of open fields and pasture and 133 acres of working native hardwood forest. One and a half miles of perennial streams on the property flow to the Rapidan River, a major tributary of the Rappahannock River, which

provides drinking water to downstream communities and ultimately flows to the Chesapeake Bay. The easement protects the water quality in these streams and the riparian buffers along their banks, which support habitat for both aquatic and terrestrial species. Visible from the Appalachian Trail and Shenandoah National Park, the farm holds important scenic value as well.

Long Acre Farm is the sixth ALE project PEC completed in the last two years, conserving over 2,330 acres in Orange, Madison, Culpeper and Greene counties.

Several of us retreated to the Watsons' front porch to shelter from the rain: PEC Conservation Program Manager Kim Biasioli, American Farmland Trust Program Manager Jen Perkins and PEC Conservation Director Mike Kane. We reflected on the easement and what it meant for the future. Dustin said he used to lose sleep at night when he imagined losing this place. But now he and his wife Gillian are getting ready to start a new generation.



Farmer Dustin Watson holding an easement sign. Photo by Kim Biasioli

Farm-to-Table Dinner and Virtual Auction

When > Saturday, September 19
Where > Glen Ora Farm

We are honored to invite you to PEC's 2026 Farm-to-Table Dinner at historic Glen Ora Farm in The Plains for an enchanted evening celebrating conservation in the Piedmont. Enjoy a curated farm-to-table dinner, featuring the freshest locally grown produce from the PEC Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows. As always, this event will feature a live paddle raise, and be accompanied by a virtual auction the week leading up to the event. The dinner, paddle raise and auction raise funds to support PEC's mission: protecting and restoring the lands and waters of the Virginia Piedmont, while building stronger, more sustainable communities. Visit pecva.org/glenora for more information.



Volunteer at the Community Farm!

Join Dana, Teddy, Catherine and Lea and help PEC grow and harvest more than 50,000 pounds of fresh vegetables and fruits for donation to food banks in Loudoun and Clarke counties. Volunteers of all ages (as well as groups) are welcome most Tuesdays, Thursdays and every other Saturday. For more information and to sign up, visit pecva.org/farm, or email Lea Justice at ljustice@pecva.org with questions.



Catherine harvesting turnips. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Who's Protecting the Piedmont?

The Virginia Piedmont is a breathtaking, historic landscape full of exceptional natural resources, productive farms and forests, and nearly a half-million conserved acres that support its ecosystems, local food supply and wildlife. The beauty of the Piedmont endures thanks to the intentional planning and careful work of many dedicated people and organizations. Here, we highlight three individuals protecting the region in a variety of ways.

Barry Buschow

VOLUNTEER

By Ellie Young, Plantings for the Piedmont Assistant

Volunteers play a vital role not only in The Piedmont Environmental Council's work, but in our local communities and lands as well. Whether planting trees, harvesting crops at our Community Farm, or monitoring kestrel boxes, PEC volunteers make the outcomes of our many programs possible. Barry Buschow, a seasoned member of the PEC tree planting volunteer program, is one of these dedicated individuals. Through his passion for conservation, learning, and community involvement, Barry demonstrates how one person's impact can inspire others and create lasting effects.

As someone who enjoys volunteering and spending time outdoors, Barry began volunteering with PEC's Plantings for the Piedmont program after moving to Boston, Virginia in Culpeper County from the city of Falls Church in 2016. Already a Master Naturalist, he said it was a "natural progression to come to an organization like PEC that does so much for the environment." After planting scores of trees as a volunteer, in 2023 Barry worked with PEC to install a riparian buffer on his own property to promote healthy habitats and streams.



Barry at a PEC tree planting event. Photo by Hugh Kenny

One thing that he values most about volunteering with PEC is the opportunity to meet new people and experience the beauty of Virginia's landscape. "I've met a lot of great people volunteering with PEC... and you get to visit these astonishing places and see how beautiful Virginia is," he said. The Virginia Piedmont is filled with unique lands,

history and viewsheds, and volunteering is a gratifying way to experience them. Recently, Barry brought a couple of naturalist friends to a tree planting at Chancellor's Rock Farm in Flint Hill, helping expand PEC's network of volunteers. He also attended a tree planting in Hume this spring. His long-term goal is to plant more than 1,000 trees in his lifetime, and he's close to achieving it!

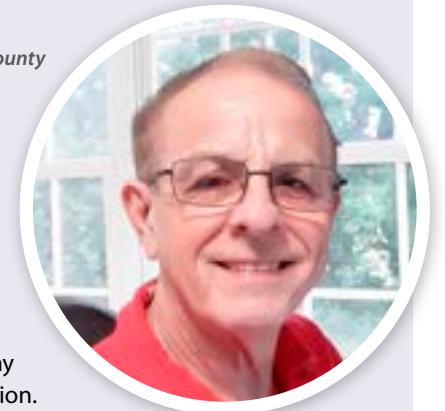
Volunteers like Barry are essential to the outcomes of the work we do at PEC. Barry and other volunteers like him remind us that one person's dedication can make a lasting impact. Volunteering opportunities at PEC are available in many different program areas, including the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative, the Plantings for the Piedmont program, PEC's Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows, tabling opportunities at local events, and many more!

Greg Pirio

COMMUNITY PARTNER

By Emily Johnson, Land Use Field Representative – Loudoun County

Greg Pirio has lived in his Loudoun County home for 14 years. He's also traveled the world as a respected communications strategist and journalist, appearing on international programs and publishing extensively on conflict issues. "I've always been involved my whole life in issues of social justice," Greg told us. His commitment started early, growing up next to a California steel mill where children couldn't always play outside and people died of asthma from the air pollution.



Loudoun community advocate Greg Pirio. Photo by Greg Pirio

Then, just over a year ago, a gas-turbine power plant unexpectedly opened at a data center 150 yards from his Loudoun home. The power plant's constant whine gives him headaches and drives away birds, while neighbors worry about the health effects from the plant's exhaust. Greg quickly realized his community needed an advocate. "This is what I've been doing internationally, and now it's right in my front yard."

Greg estimates he has now given at least 25 interviews for media outlets like Smithsonian Magazine and BBC, as well as for other people on the frontlines of polluting data centers. "A lot of other communities and countries want to learn from the negative experience that we're having here in Loudoun," he says. Greg has also been a central community organizing force, hosting meetings at his home, starting a community group chat, and encouraging neighbors who are new to public speaking.

This is "kind of like a revitalization of democracy. Here people are speaking up, they're learning how to find their voice and convey it to elected officials," said Greg, adding that he's met wonderful people through his organizing. It "is an incredible source of joy for me. We never talk partisan politics. We're all concerned about community, about the environment, about our health."

"Community is what we have," Greg says. "We have to transform our anger into action, and that's what people are doing." Now called the Sterling Community Action group, Greg and his neighbors are speaking with officials, installing their own noise monitoring system, and continuing to garner media attention as the first Virginia community beside a gas-powered data center. He credits The Piedmont Environmental Council for getting the group started with initial community meetings and a recent air quality study, which "helped to galvanize a bunch of us," he says. "And it keeps growing," especially through social media, Greg reports.

Greg knows from both his professional experience and his advocacy here that "the human story of this is the most important part."

"It's not abstract," he says. New power demands have real-life impacts for him and his neighbors. "This planning has to make sense for communities and the environment."

George Grayson

PEC LEGACY DONOR & BOARD MEMBER

By Liese Dart Hodges, Senior Strategy & Advancement Officer

Long before George Grayson's first gift to The Piedmont Environmental Council in 1992, his path was shaped by a profound family legacy of conservation and community engagement. His parents, William Grayson and Janet Grayson Whitehouse, were both "very environmentally focused" and dedicated themselves to preserving open space, trails, parks and habitat across Virginia and the Washington, D.C. area.

"My father was an avid birder, heading the Audubon Naturalist Society for many years, and loved everything that was wild and natural," George recalls. His mother was "very much a full partner in these efforts," and after George's father passed away in 1980, went on to lead a number of conservation organizations herself.

Growing up on his family's farm in

Fauquier County, George developed his own lifelong passion for the land while riding and jumping ponies across the open fields. "You just saw so much amazing countryside... there's no better way to see it than from the back of a horse." Remembering a childhood warning from an older friend — to enjoy the open land now because it would all be gone in 20 to 25 years — George said, "I honestly think she would have been right if not for PEC. People don't realize that this conserved landscape is a result of engaged citizens, fighting over decades for the conservation and preservation of open space that benefits us all."



George with his Virginia Field Hunter Champion, "Nemo." Photo by Tiffany Dillon Keen

Inspired by his parents' example and determined to protect the landscape of his youth, George swiftly became an active steward of the environment in his adult years. He has dedicated himself to restoring grassland bird habitat on his farm alongside his partner Maria Tousimis with their advisor and friend, Fritz Reuter.

George has remained enamored with the stunning topography of Virginia and is passionate about seeing it protected. He joined the PEC Board of Directors in 2015, with a hope that people will recognize that the Piedmont we enjoy today didn't happen by accident. "There's a banner I see at some events... it says 'Enjoy the view. It's not a coincidence. Thank the stewards of the

land.' I like that message."

As an investment advisor, George wants to see PEC remain a force in the region well into the future, long after he is gone. That desire has inspired him to become part of PEC's Bill Backer Legacy Society. Named for the avid conservationist and former PEC president, this is a group of donors who have made the important decision to remember PEC in their estate planning. Legacy giving often provides a means for someone to make a donation that isn't possible during one's lifetime.

When asked how PEC shines, George notes PEC's success in support of land conservation and its leadership in Richmond on state policy issues. But he also says "we need everybody," and emphasizes how important it is that PEC maintains strong partnerships. "Collectively, we've now preserved over 440,000 acres as the result of a lot of work by many different organizations working together. To see the green on the map growing with easements, and to ensure we can defend the easements. That's the core of why we are here."

Clouds of Data and Pollution: Gas Plants at Data Centers Threaten Public Health

Continued from cover

As utilities struggle with capacity challenges, the wait time for data centers to get the power they need from the electric grid grows. Highlighting the extreme delays new projects face, “Dominion recently presented to the State Corporation Commission a process for large load power requests that would take up to 25 years for a new customer to get through,” Julie said.

As a result, while the Vantage’s on-site gas generation is the first such “mini power plant” in the region, it won’t be the last. Another data center developer in Loudoun has proposed 23 gas turbines — almost three times as many as the Vantage VA2 facility — at the Digital Dulles site just 15 minutes away.

Who pays the price?

Set against a landscape of increasing air pollution nationwide, this trend endangers community health, especially among the most vulnerable. A recent report from the American Lung Association found that nearly half of the nation’s children — whose smaller lungs and rapid breathing rate make them especially susceptible to health effects from pollution — live in places with dangerous levels of air pollution. The report also found that people of color are more than twice as likely as white people to live in a community with unsafe levels of both smog and fine particulate matter. PEC’s study of the Vantage VA2 data center similarly showed that areas estimated to

have some of the highest impacts from the Vantage facility overlap with marginalized communities to the east.

The Vantage VA2 study focused on fine particulate matter, widely recognized as one of the most harmful pollutants to human health because its microscopic size allows it to penetrate deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream. Extensive scientific evidence shows that long-term exposure — including at levels below current federal standards — is associated with increased risk of heart disease, stroke, respiratory illness, asthma exacerbation and premature death. Air pollution from increased use of gas turbines will lead to millions of dollars in annual public-health costs for Virginians.

The cost is also reflected on monthly electric bills. Often touted as a data center solution that doesn’t impact other ratepayers, on-site gas generation is still inextricably tied to the broader network of energy infrastructure. Like Vantage VA2, many data centers with on-site gas generation intend to use their turbines as a stop-gap measure until they can connect to the grid, and so still contribute to the demand for more power plants, transmission lines and substations. At the same time, utilities are now in competition with data center developers for a limited supply of gas turbines, driving up the costs of both. While wealthy tech companies can afford to spend as much as it takes to get to market faster, utilities trying to replace aging turbines will pass the increased costs onto their ratepayers.

A better way forward

When the developers of the Vantage VA2 data center wanted to add on-site gas generation to the project to bypass the wait for power supply from Dominion, they only needed to submit a minor source air permit to the Virginia

Department of Environmental Quality. This type of permit requires no public hearing or notice, and so when the data center came online, the local community was blindsided by the emissions and the noise, which residents say has caused tinnitus, disrupted their sleep and made being outside unbearable.

In April, PEC held an information session for local residents to learn more about the results of the Vantage study and what they could do to make their voices heard. “People had a lot of questions and comments,” said Gem Bingol, PEC’s senior field representative for Loudoun County. “My sense was that they were grateful to have the information.”

Greg Pirio, who lives just 150 yards from the Vantage site, says “PEC’s support by publishing that [air quality] study was important because it highlights what can happen.” Greg and his neighbors are seeking solutions that will “improve what’s happened to us and make a difference for us and for other communities.” Their central request is simple: “Stop permitting power plants from being built on the data centers.” (Read more about Greg on Page 6.)

Though DEQ has critiqued PEC’s study and released its own report in response, Julie emphasized that “PEC stands by our study methodology, which projects the cumulative impact on public health if more on-site generation is approved in the future through minor permits. DEQ’s response only defends the appropriateness of the minor permit approval and emphasizes that the site is in compliance with all regulations.”

“Being below the federal standard isn’t the same as zero health impact,” says Michael Cork, the researcher who conducted the air quality study on



Julie Bolthouse and Emily Johnson address residents at PEC’s information session on the Vantage VA2 air quality study. Photo by Brian Maleki

Vantage VA2. “DEQ’s report is explicit that it doesn’t evaluate health impacts. It doesn’t speak to the added health burden from new infrastructure, which is the gap our analysis is meant to fill.”

Evaluating data centers’ on-site gas power plants in isolation is not enough. Even if individually their emissions are under the permitting threshold, each additional gas turbine adds to a cumulative air pollution burden for communities. The minor permits do not measure those cumulative effects.

PEC supports a “pause to plan” approach to managing data center demand, with transparent accounting and appropriate safeguards at the state level. We’re encouraging towns and counties to do three things:

- 1) reject data center proposals that include on-site natural gas power near homes or schools;
- 2) amend regulations to require an additional approval process for any gas power plant behind the meter; and
- 3) treat these on-site power plants as standalone electricity-generating facilities that need more thorough review of public health impacts.

Our state and local governments must take action now to ensure this industry is not allowed to degrade local air quality of our communities and steal all the progress made over the years through stronger emission controls on cars and power plants.



Vantage VA2 is running gas turbines around the clock, directly next to residential neighborhoods. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Pop Quiz

QUESTION

The United States celebrates its 250th anniversary this summer, but five counties in the Virginia Piedmont were already established before the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Which of these counties was created first?

ANSWER

e) Orange County

The Virginia House of Burgesses created Orange County in 1734 when it adopted An Act for Dividing Spotsylvania County. The first Europeans — 12 immigrant families from Germany — arrived in what would become known as Germanna 20 years earlier. But the land was inhabited long before that by indigenous peoples, including the Manahoac, who were living in this area at the time of European settlement.

PEC has been working toward the creation of the Rapidan River-Clark Mountain Rural Historic District, which will encompass portions of Orange County as well as parts of Madison and Culpeper counties. Historic districts are honorary designations that recognize significant cultural landscapes and the natural features, historic buildings and structures that they encompass.



The Rapidan Mill on the Rapidan River in Orange County. While the current structure was built in the 1950s, the original mill on this site predated the Declaration of Independence. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Meet the Team: Community Farm

By Kim Votruba-Matook, Grants Manager

The Piedmont Environmental Council's Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows in Aldie is a remarkable place punching way above its weight class in community impact. The 8-acre farm, part of the larger 172-acre Roundabout Meadows property owned by PEC, epitomizes PEC's mission. It serves as a demonstration site for our innovative agrivoltaics project, supports hands-on education about local agriculture through its ever-growing volunteer program, and donates nearly all of the produce it grows to hunger relief organizations serving Loudoun, Fauquier and Clarke county residents. In 2025, the Community Farm grew and donated over 57,700 pounds of fresh produce, its largest annual yield yet. Since its first growing season in 2019, PEC has donated over 240,000 pounds of food, worth a collective retail value of over \$1.1 million.

None of this would be possible without PEC's dedicated farm team, which consists of Gilberts Corner Program Manager **Dana Melby**, Community Farm Manager **Teddy Pitsiokos**, Community Farm Assistant Manager **Catherine Fisher**, Gilberts Corner Farmers Market Manager **Jen Wilkins** and Volunteer Coordinator **Lea Justice**, as well as two seasonal growers. With decades of combined experience in agriculture and farm management, it's no wonder they can perform such incredible

feats and build on their successes year over year. Dana emphasizes that "the strength of the harmonious team makes work on the farm joyful" and helps this small group work with a variety of people including volunteers, visitors interested in PEC's conservation and agrivoltaics work, contractors, and their growing number of hunger relief partners.

Farm activities run the gamut, and staff need to be masters of all trades, from agriculture to land conservation to solar solutions to volunteer engagement. "I think most people don't know how multidisciplinary farm work can be," Teddy says. "While the work is intensely physical, I am also using math, geometry, biology, chemistry and systems design every day." Teddy and Catherine monitor all the produce they plant and grow across the farm, and collect and codify data to track the impact they're making, while also finding ways to improve their processes and produce. Soil testing, pest control, growth assessments, and weighing produce are all critical components to the farm's work.

Testing and data collection are of particular interest for the farm's quarter-acre that holds PEC's agrivoltaics demonstration project, where beds of vegetables, both in-ground and in raised beds, grow under three rows of 42 solar panels. The power produced by the array offsets all the Community Farm's electrical usage and includes battery storage to backup critical systems like the well pump, cold storage and greenhouse in the event of a grid outage. This project is an educational tool, which means collecting and sharing data about crop growth with PEC's networks, as well as evaluating agrivoltaics as an energy solution for small farms and low-income communities across Virginia and beyond.

While the growing season runs from April to



From left to right: Catherine Fisher, Teddy Pitsiokos and Dana Melby. Photo by Hugh Kenny

October, work on the farm is active all year round. Catherine notes that "farming is complex and requires careful decision-making, both in the moment and in the dead of winter when outcomes are months away." To add to that complexity and joyful work, Catherine says that "every farm season engages different people, and this year we've added new food pantry partners and planned collaborations with many new organizations. First-time volunteers from April are becoming regulars, and our farm team has grown to include seasonal growers and PEC's wonderful volunteer coordinator."

The volunteer program at the farm highlights local agriculture while educating people about sustainable farming practices. Volunteers are invited to participate in every aspect of the farming process — from seeding and transplanting to weeding and harvesting.

In 2025, the farm staff welcomed 802 volunteers to support their work, a 140% increase from 2024. "I love the conversations held with volunteers as we work together in the fields," says Lea. "The shared work is a great icebreaker; we already have something in common. People come to volunteer at the farm from all walks of life and for diverse reasons. Hearing their stories is always fascinating and renews my belief that

we as an organization are the sum of our parts, including all these volunteers, and are stronger for it."

The farm's work extends into the Gilberts Corner Farmers Market on the weekends, all year round, welcoming local vendors selling everything from French pastries, locally famous barbecue, kettle corn, ice cream, fresh produce and meat, and more. Gilberts Corner Farmers Market Manager Jen Wilkins manages the market and works to enhance its history and legacy as a place to find local food and fiber. And with food insecurity on the rise in the region, the market now accepts SNAP benefits, providing essential access to locally-grown, nutrient-rich foods.

The Community Farm, Gilberts Corner and Roundabout Meadows as a whole offer many opportunities to connect the over two million nearby residents with the Piedmont's open spaces. Whether people volunteer, visit and learn about agrivoltaics, shop at the Farmers Market, or receive donated food, we empower each other to build stronger, more sustainable food systems and protect our vital agricultural culture and resources. The farm may be small, but its work has mighty ripple effects throughout our nine-county region and beyond.



Lea Justice. Photo by Hugh Kenny



Jen Wilkins. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Taste the Terroir with Buy Fresh Buy Local this Summer

The lines are queuing up for Wegmeyer's fresh-picked strawberries at Gilberts Corner Farmers Market in Loudoun County. Raucous mounds of magenta radishes entice one to browse the Double H booth at the Market at IX in Charlottesville. In all the counties in between, farm stands are stocked with seasonal delicacies and farm-to-table menus just got more interesting. It's a delicious time of year!

You can choose your own adventure when eating local in the Piedmont. Farms, farmers markets, CSAs, orchards, farm stands, local-sourcing grocers and restaurants, and more can all be found in your *Buy Fresh Buy*

Local food guide. A treasure map to the terroir of the Piedmont, unique to each season, these guides provide a concise directory of local food producers, purveyors and markets. Visit buylocalpiedmont.org to access an interactive food map and digital copy of *Buy Fresh Buy Local*. You can find hard copies of *Buy Fresh Buy Local* guides at a corner store, library, visitors center or farmers market near you. If you have trouble locating a source, contact bfbl@pecva.org and we'll help find your nearest copy. What's for dinner (or dessert!) this week? Turn a boring chore into a tasty adventure, with *Buy Fresh Buy Local* as your guide.



ROAD TRIPPING FOR A GOOD CAUSE:

Calling volunteers to help distribute Buy Fresh Buy Local!

Volunteers can choose a route in their area and deliver guides to local farm stands, coffee shops, and markets. Help support the local food system while touring great venues and sampling the season's best along the way! If interested, email Lea Justice at ljustice@pecva.org for more information.

On the Ground

Albemarle & Charlottesville

➤ Over the next three years, Albemarle County will implement the **AC44 Comprehensive Plan** focusing on four major initiatives:

- The **Zoning Modernization** project is a comprehensive update to the 40-year-old zoning ordinance to make regulations clearer, more consistent and better aligned with the community's vision for the future.
- **Activity Centers** in the county's Development Areas will identify locations for higher-density development and redevelopment.
- A multimodal transportation planning effort will prioritize completion of the current list of transportation projects and develop the county's first **Multimodal Transportation Plan**.
- Shorter-term priorities for the **Rural Area** include: allowing updated uses in existing non-residential structures; considering permitting restaurants, weddings, and other events and agricultural operations; and continued work on allowing craft artisan uses. In the longer-term, a detailed analysis will identify areas of terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity, active agricultural lands, and historical and archaeological resources, as well as drinking watersheds and entrance corridor buffers — all of which will lay the foundation for the county's first Rural Area Plan.

The implementation of the AC44 Comprehensive Plan is one of PEC's highest priorities in Albemarle. PEC will be actively engaging community members, supervisors, planning commissioners, county staff and allied organizations to ensure that these initiatives use best practices and comply with the Comprehensive Plan.

Clarke

- County staff have completed the public input meetings on the newly drafted **Rural Lands Plan**, which includes the county's historic villages. The draft will come to the Planning Commission for a public hearing over the summer, then move on to the Board of Supervisors for adoption.
- After posting potential routes for the 765-kilovolt **Joshua Falls-Yeat transmission line**, carrying power from West Virginia to Maryland, Dominion Energy is holding public meetings for impacted counties in June and July. PEC is monitoring to see if this line impacts Clarke County and will share public meeting information and other opportunities for people to make their voices heard.

Culpeper

- Strata Energy has withdrawn its application for **Maroon Solar**, a large, utility-scale solar installation on Raccoon Ford Road in southern Culpeper County, after the Planning Commission recommended denial. This marks the fourth time the project has failed to obtain a conditional use permit. PEC opposed the project because of Strata Energy's history of erosion and sediment violations

and the potential presence of rare plants on the site. Strata Energy plans to make a fifth application in the future.

- Several of Culpeper's **data centers** are now under construction, including Databank at the corner of state Route 3 and U.S. Route 29. The Culpeper Technology Campus and Copper Ridge, both STACK Infrastructure-owned campuses between McDevitt Drive and East Chandler Avenue, are expected to break ground this summer. If you are being impacted by the construction, you can find contact information for your town and county elected officials on our website: pecva.org/culpeper
- The Culpeper Citizen Information Network is hosting a **free lecture series about zoning and development**. The series is designed to inform residents how zoning ordinances, the comprehensive plan and citizen input all play a role in land use decisions by the county. The next lecture is tentatively scheduled for July 16 in Jeffersonton.

Fauquier

- Remington Tech Park developers have changed their plan for **on-site power generation** from natural gas turbines to natural gas fuel cells. From both noise and air emissions perspectives, PEC sees this as a positive change and will continue to advocate for the health, safety and welfare of Fauquier residents.
- Williams Co., developer of the **Power Express Quantico Lateral gas pipeline**, have asked some landowners in the Catlett area to allow property surveys. Neither the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the State Corporation Commission, nor Fauquier County have received an application for this pipeline project. PEC is working with partners to identify the prospective route and understand all potential impacts.
- Dominion Energy acquired 85 acres adjoining its **Morrisville substation**, positioning the site for a possible major expansion, separate substation, or battery energy storage system. PEC and partners are closely monitoring all activity related to this substation site and its surrounds.

- **Fauquier Forward**, a 501(c)(3) whose mission is to "build a county that works better for everyone," is deepening community divisions by pitting protected lands and zoning restrictions against the tax-revenue potential of commercial and industrial development. PEC and partners are demanding transparency around this organization's actual mission, which we believe to be advocacy for new data center development.

- The Town of Remington invited area residents to an Open House to learn about its **Comprehensive Plan**, the committee leading its review and revision, and ways to take part in the process. PEC continues to work with other members of the Comprehensive Plan Committee via biweekly public meetings through 2026 and early 2027.

Greene

- The county has started work on an **updated**

Comprehensive Plan scheduled to be adopted in 2028. As part of the update process, PEC will be advocating for rural protections — including action items to explore a purchase of development rights program and a riparian buffer protection program. The county is also in the process of preparing a flood resilience plan.

- PEC is following the **economic development** work associated with the U.S. Route 29 corridor in Greene and will continue to engage Greene regarding potential impacts of future development.

Loudoun

➤ During its June business meeting, the Board of Supervisors discussed a version of proactive zoning enforcement that is part of the **Western Loudoun Rural Standards and Uses Zoning Ordinance Amendment** process. The board also discussed a county-led inventory of existing rural business uses to confirm that filings in the county system are consistent with the current use and that all appropriate health and safety permits are in place.

- Hosted by the Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition in partnership with PEC, Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, Save Rural Loudoun and Loudoun's Future, community **groundwater** meetings wrapped up in April. With over 300 attendees in total, these meetings revealed that long-term groundwater availability is clearly a concern for residents. This group will hold more localized meetings as it plans next steps in support of a Groundwater Management Area for Loudoun and Fauquier.

- In April, despite incredible community support for partial undergrounding of the proposed **Golden to Mars transmission corridor**, the State Corporation Commission selected Route 4, which will cross school property at Rock Ridge High School and Rosa Lee Carter Elementary School, requiring School Board approval by July 2. Given the School Board's previous opposition, the SCC designated Route 3A as the mandatory backup. This alternative cuts through backyards, and would require Dominion to use eminent domain to seize land from homeowners (an outcome the SCC says would be "regrettable").

Madison

- PEC's work continues on the proposed **Rapidan River-Clark Mountain Rural Historic District**. Our consultant, the Fairfield Foundation, recently completed survey work in the Madison County community of Tanners, and PEC has formally submitted the nomination to Virginia's Department of Historic Resources. During the department's review process, PEC expects to hold another community meeting to gather public input in summer or fall 2026. We hope the nomination will go before the Board of Historic Resources by the end of the year. If the Board of Historic Resources approves the nomination, the district will be listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register. That listing opens the door for a final submission: for review by the Keeper of the National Register for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The historic district, which includes over 40,000 acres of mostly intact agricultural landscape in Madison, Culpeper

On the Ground

and Orange counties, would be one of the largest rural historic districts in Virginia.

Orange

➤ The Orange County Board of Supervisors has **removed data centers as a by-right use** from the Industrial Zoning District. Now, any future Orange County data center application will need to seek a rezoning to the Technology Zoning District and obtain a special use permit. The only exception might be the property already rezoned for the Wilderness Crossing development. No data centers are currently proposed in Orange County. PEC closely monitors land use applications and will alert the public should a data center be proposed.

➤ The Orange Town Council has approved an **updated zoning ordinance definition of “data center”** that better describes modern, hyperscale

data centers. Unfortunately, the council did not incorporate PEC’s recommendation that the definition clearly distinguish between on-site emergency back up power generation and on-site primary power generation. However, council members publicly stated their intent to address that elsewhere within the zoning ordinance soon. Next up, we expect the Town Council to continue discussions about a draft data center policy document and to make additions to the zoning ordinance to provide use standards that any future data center would be required to meet. No data centers are currently proposed for the Town of Orange.

Rappahannock

➤ Rappahannock County continues to evaluate designs for a **new, replacement courthouse**

building on the existing courthouse grounds in the Town of Washington. Following an open house in April, the Board of Supervisors is further assessing the most recent proposal after the judges who will preside in the building raised concerns about some design elements.

➤ Phase II of **Rush River Commons** is working to secure tenants for the planned commercial office spaces. The county Library Board of Trustees is currently considering an offer to relocate there from their current location nearby.

➤ FirstEnergy has announced plans to file an application to wreck and rebuild the existing **Page-Sperryville transmission line** with the State Corporation Commission in June. PEC is not opposed to the rebuild of the 138 kilovolt line, though we have numerous concerns about FirstEnergy’s lack of public engagement and lack of substantive information about the project.

Out & About

Bobolink Bird Walk at Whisper Hill Farm



Photo by Colette Cannell

▲ PEC’s Laura McShane led a bird walk at Whisper Hill Farm, an organic produce farm in Scottsville, Virginia. Sixty participants enjoyed the morning sightings of Virginia’s grassland birds and meeting some of their local farmers to learn about the ways they create and protect grassland bird habitat on their property.

Sky Meadows Hike



Photo by Hugh Kenny

◀ PEC’s Laura Schlieske and Sky Meadows park rangers led a guided hike from Sky Meadows State Park to PEC’s Piedmont Memorial Overlook, recently recognized as a “Treasured View” by Scenic Virginia.

Earth Day Cleanup & Tree Planting at Clermont Farm



Photo by Hugh Kenny



Photo by Hugh Kenny

◀ Led by PEC’s Linnea Sherman, Ellie Young and Lea Justice, 23 volunteers celebrated Earth Day with PEC at Clermont Farm in Clarke County, restoring a riparian buffer tree planting along Dog Run.

Out & About

Fodderstack 10K



Photo by Sarah Parmelee

PEC's Laura Schliesske and Emily Stern supported dark skies by running the Fodderstack 10K, a point-to-point road race between Flint Hill and Little Washington in Rappahannock and a fundraiser for the Rappahannock County Park, one of the two designated Dark Skies parks in the Piedmont.

Solar on the Farm



Photo by Kim Votruba-Matook

PEC's Solar for the Ag Community agrivoltaics workshop, held on Earth Day at the Community Farm, welcomed over 60 participants from all walks of the agricultural economy. Attendees included farmers, wineries, grazers, local government officials, Virginia-based developers and local and national organizations including Loudoun County Economic Development, American Farmland Trust and World Resources Institute.

Sperryfest and Batesville Day



Photo by Sarah Parmelee

Rappahannock-Rapidan Conservation Program Manager Bryn Sonnett represents PEC at Sperryfest in Sperryville.



Photo by Kim Biasioli

Don McCown and Lauria McShane represent PEC at Batesville Day in Albemarle.

Keswick Community Meeting



PEC held a community meeting at Keswick Hunt Club for local residents to learn more about the Dominion Energy's proposal to wreck and rebuild 20 miles of the Charlottesville-Gordonsville transmission line, which will significantly increase the size of the line and potentially expand the right of way through the Southwest Mountains Rural Historic District.

Orange County Conservation Speed Dating Workshop



Photo by Lauria McShane

The Piedmont Environmental Council and Rappahannock River Roundtable held an Orange County Conservation Speed Dating Workshop alongside local conservation technical service providers and practitioners. Ten landowners and producers in Orange County joined us to learn how they can get conservation and regenerative agriculture done on their properties.

Spring Planting at the Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows



Photo by Jennifer Ayers

Four PEC farmers, 154 unique volunteers, and one volunteer coordinator have planted tens of thousands of plants since March. Season eight is growing strong!

Volunteer at the Community Farm! To sign up, visit pecva.org/farm or email Lea Justice at ljustice@pecva.org with questions.

Dear Friends,

Every year, The Piedmont Environmental Council takes a day to celebrate the continuing progress toward our core mission of protecting lands and waters while building stronger, more, sustainable communities. On a beautiful day at the end of May, we came together for our Annual Gathering, held this year at Longwood Farm, halfway down the Cedar Run watershed in the middle of working farms and forests that define a large part of Fauquier County as it extends south from Warrenton toward the Occoquan and Potomac rivers near Dumfries.

Lying between two ancient roads — the Rogues Road (part of the old Carolina Trail) and the Old Dumfries Road — with Cedar Run running through the palisades of Auburn to the junction with Turkey Run, Longwood dates back the 1750s and is currently being managed for rotational crops and hay. In recent memory, it was the center of a major thoroughbred breeding operation, with a modern barn and equine medical facility. The new owners are leasing the best crop land to local farmers while restoring riparian forested buffers and wetlands near the banks of Cedar Run, connecting to conserved lands. They were joined at PEC's Annual Gathering by family members and descendants of families who have lived and worked at Longwood over the past 250 years, mirroring this year's recognition of the United States' 250th anniversary.

Families in Cedar Run watershed — from Catlett, Casanova, Castleton, Midland and Auburn — have protected 21,000 acres through a combination of public and private efforts over the past 50 years. The first was the Arundel family's donation of a wildlife preserve on Wildcat Mountain to the Nature Conservancy in the 1970s. The most recent was just this month, June 1, 2026, when Cedar Run Conservation Partners, LLC, recorded a conservation easement

supported by the Fauquier County purchase of development rights program, one of the leading local farmland preservation programs in the United States. Through the Julian Scheer Fauquier Conservation Fund — one of the 10 funds managed by PEC and the Piedmont Foundation — PEC has connected landowners to a variety of local, state, federal and private programs to accelerate conservation and restoration.

Each conservation and restoration project in the Piedmont is a cause for celebration, a generous and courageous act, especially now when so many economic forces are targeting this area for other purposes. The Piedmont's nearly 680,000 acres of working farms and forests lie amidst a web of thousands of miles of streams and rivers, along scenic byways and within historic districts, with anchors in local, state and federal parks and conservation areas throughout. They are a national model of community conservation representing a strong commitment to local self determination that has resulted in globally significant corridors for wildlife biodiversity. But that model is increasingly threatened by the unmitigated impacts of the emerging plans for new data centers and the new energy generation, transmission lines, gas pipelines and substations that serve them, which are consuming hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of acres of land.

Over the coming months, we must all join together and demand that Virginia pause to plan and analyze alternative approaches to data center design and energy and water systems that take into



Combining conservation, restoration and improved agricultural practices, Longwood Farm — the site of PEC's Annual Gathering this year — is a model for sustainable working lands. Photo by Hugh Kenny

account the aggregate and cumulative impacts on our communities and conservation values. Our counties and towns cannot continue to approve data centers without public oversight and complete transparency about the impacts on our air, water and lands, and all they support. At every level of government, we must insist that decisions be consistent with local comprehensive plans, with commitments to environmental quality, and with our obligation to protect the health of the most vulnerable populations. And we must ensure the cost of new infrastructure for energy and water supply, including the cost of mitigation, is fully paid for by the data center industry, not the ratepayers and residents of our communities.

Sincerely,

Chris Miller, President



Photo by Hugh Kenny



The Piedmont View

A MEMBERSHIP NEWSLETTER OF THE PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL SUMMER 2026



INSIDE

Conserving a family farm at Long Acre; reflections on the Piedmont Memorial Overlook; data centers and air quality; meet the Community Farm Team; PEC staff out and about; and more!

Summer sunrise over northeastern Albemarle County. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Pop Quiz

QUESTION

The United States celebrates its 250th anniversary this summer, but five counties in the Virginia Piedmont were already established before the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Which of these counties was created first?

- a) Albemarle County
- b) Culpeper County
- c) Fauquier County
- d) Loudoun County
- e) Orange County



A map of Virginia, circa 1755. Courtesy The New York Public Library

ANSWER ON PAGE 7



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