



The Piedmont View

A MEMBERSHIP NEWSLETTER OF THE PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

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CONSERVATION EDITION

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Hilton Farm: A Key Piece of the Conservation Puzzle in the Rappahannock-Rapidan Watershed

By Lindsey Loving, Communications Specialist

You know that feeling when you're putting together a puzzle and there's that "Aha!" moment, when filling in one missing piece brings everything together? Hilton Farm in Orange County is an example of this phenomenon playing out in conservation form.

Owned by Mike and Judy Willis, Hilton Farm is a 365-acre cattle farm near Somerset nestled in the Madison-Barbour Rural Historic District. Among its natural resources are more than 3 miles of Rappahannock River tributaries and 80 acres of forest and wildlife habitat. The property also includes a historic 19th-century plantation school house and a cemetery, and is located minutes, as the crow flies, from Montpelier — the former home of U.S. president James Madison. The farm is visible from the Montpelier-Grelen Trail Network and the Blue Ridge Turnpike

(state Route 231), which is part of the Journey Through Hallowed Ground Scenic Byway.

The beauty and character of the landscape around Hilton Farm is no accident, and the Willises' decision to conserve it helps fill in a key piece of a contiguous block of more than 13,000 acres of protected land, supporting The Piedmont Environmental Council's longstanding goal of conserving this nationally-recognized historic and scenic landscape.

This January, with funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program, PEC purchased and placed a conservation easement on Hilton Farm. Through the ALE program and partnerships with landowners like the Willises, PEC is accelerating conservation of working farms and forest lands, improving water quality, restoring wildlife habitat and preserving historic and



Hilton Farm in Orange County, VA. Photo by Hugh Kenny

cultural resources in the Rappahannock-Rapidan watershed.

The Willises' goals are simple and admirable: "We believe in keeping the property in a rural setting," said Mike. The farm also represents their livelihood and their family's future, with three generations involved in the cattle operation they run across Hilton Farm and two other nearby farms

PEC also helped the Willises conserve through the ALE program. Mike and stepson Wesley work those farms every day of the week.

"We would like to have the debt reduced so that our children and grandchildren are able to keep it as a working farm for future generations," said Judy.

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Shenandoah Borderlands project protects 5,000 acres for clean water, habitat, scenic viewshed

By Jessica Edington, Publications Assistant

Shenandoah National Park is one of Virginia's most beloved and visited outdoor spaces, attracting 1.7 million visitors in 2025. It's also a global conservation priority for biodiversity protection and climate resiliency. For these reasons, The Piedmont Environmental Council has been strategically identifying and conserving privately-owned lands running along the park's eastern edge with a project called the Shenandoah

Borderlands Conservation Initiative.

For visitors to Shenandoah National Park, the undeveloped tracts of private forestland bordering the park are visually indistinguishable from the park itself. Because of that, they make an important contribution to the scenic landscape that draws millions of people each year for recreation and supports Virginia's robust tourism and outdoor recreation economies.

These properties provide key ecological services to the region as well. Their forestland improves air quality by pulling carbon from the atmosphere and increases the region's ability to withstand flooding from intense storm events. The headwater streams flowing through these properties help ensure clean drinking water for downstream communities. By buffering the park's natural resources, they are part of a vital wildlife corridor that provides undisturbed, contiguous habitat for species — like the cerulean warbler — that require interior forest to breed.

PEC staff conceptualized and developed the Shenandoah Borderlands Conservation Initiative and secured over \$8 million in highly competitive federal grant funding through the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy

Program. The funding supports development of five conservation easements, to be held by the Virginia Department of Forestry, that will permanently protect over 5,000 acres of forestland bordering Shenandoah National Park. This spring, we celebrate the recent completion of two of those easements: the 822-acre Cedar Mountain in Albemarle County and the 400-acre Royal Orchard, which lies in both Albemarle and Nelson counties.

Albemarle County ranks among the top 15% of all counties nationwide for growth. Without conservation easements, these properties face development pressure from nearby Crozet and Charlottesville. By conserving the Shenandoah Borderlands, PEC, the Virginia Department of Forestry and landowners are protecting the land's many public benefits — clean water, clean air, public access, scenic viewsheds, wildlife habitat, flood mitigation and more — for generations to come.

Continued on page 5



Recently conserved Cedar Mountain in Albemarle is visible from Skyline Drive.

Photo by Hugh Kenny

2025 Conservation Totals

By Elizabeth Ransom, Media & Public Relations Specialist

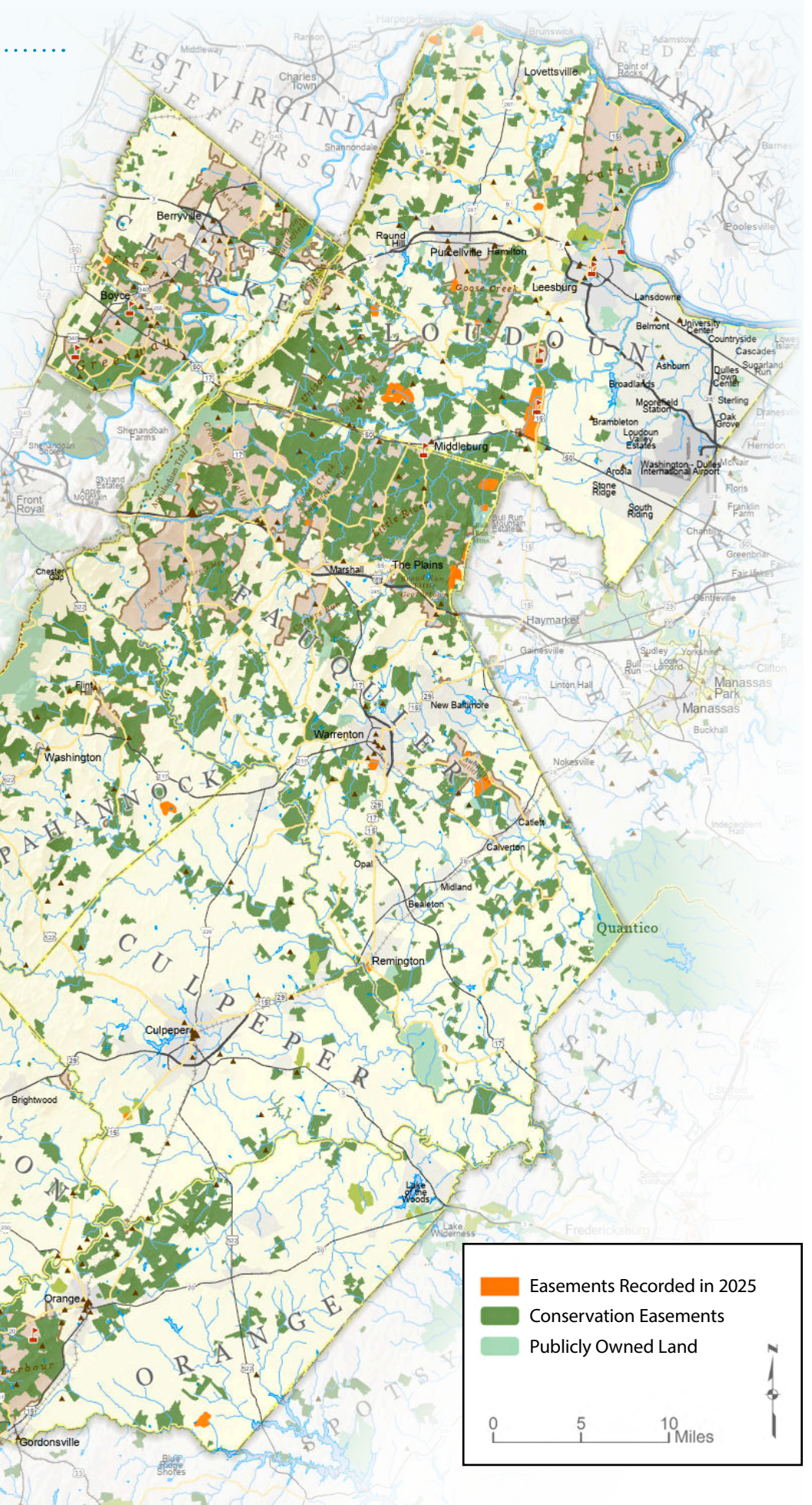
Protecting and restoring the lands and waters of the Virginia Piedmont requires a wide array of dedicated people. In 2025, landowners and conservation organizations across PEC's nine-county region conserved over 4,178 acres of undeveloped lands with conservation easements. This map (right) depicts all land that has been protected in Albemarle, Clarke, Culpeper, Fauquier, Greene, Loudoun, Madison, Orange and Rappahannock counties, including land newly conserved in 2025.

"At any scale and in every location, land conservation conveys immense public benefits," said PEC Director of Conservation Mike Kane. "Land conserved in 2025 ensures the protection in the future of over 3,000 acres of forests, more than 2,700 acres of prime farmland, over 2,000 acres along scenic byways and 880 acres within historic districts."

In partnership with the Virginia Department of Forestry, PEC is leading the **Shenandoah Borderlands Conservation Initiative**, an effort to identify and conserve privately owned lands along the edges of Shenandoah National Park. The 1,222 acres conserved as part of the initiative in 2025 ensure that these lands will forever add to the larger Appalachian corridor that is widely recognized as a global conservation priority for its biodiversity, climate resiliency, clean drinking water sources and wildlife migration (read story on page 1).

In Loudoun County, nearly 1,200 acres of forests, farmlands, meadows and river front are now saved from development after The Conservation Fund purchased **Oak Hill**, the home of former U.S. President James Monroe and a National Historic Landmark. In addition to Oak Hill's expansive natural resources, the property holds untold stories of pre-colonial Indigenous tribes and the enslaved peoples residing at Oak Hill during Monroe's ownership. Now the Virginia General Assembly and Governor Spanberger are weighing whether to make Oak Hill a state park, a truly outstanding opportunity to open for outdoor recreation and cultural interpretation one of the largest remaining historic and natural landscapes in Northern Virginia (read story on page 5).

In the ecologically and culturally important **Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve**, which straddles Fauquier and Prince William counties, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation has added 178 acres to the preserve's 2,350 acres thanks to a generous gift from a local landowner. The gift included lands with significant resources that tell the story of the Bull Run Mountains' cultural and natural history and will enhance the Virginia Outdoors Foundation's ability to have the preserve serve as a living laboratory and open-air museum used for scientific research and educational purposes.



- Easements Recorded in 2025
- Conservation Easements
- Publicly Owned Land

County-by-County Conservation Totals

County	Number of Easements Closed	Acres Protected in 2025 by Conservation Easements*	Total Acres Protected by Conservation Easements*	Total Acres Protected by Easements, NGO-Ownership, & Public Lands
Albemarle	10	1,749	114,741	141,353
Clarke	1	22	27,748	32,222
Culpeper	1	8	21,363	22,770
Fauquier	7	662	112,490	131,198
Greene	1	89	10,501	28,948
Loudoun	9	796	67,057	79,942
Madison	1	193	17,654	73,235
Orange	2	228	40,277	42,358
Rappahannock	3	431	34,742	85,081
PEC Region	35	4,178	446,572	637,107

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

Map created by PEC for presentation purposes only. Data source: County and city governments, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, and the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. Although efforts have been made to verify data, accuracy can not be guaranteed. February 2026

* Numbers are rounded

Meet the Team: Conservation

By Jessica Edington, Publications Assistant

At the heart of The Piedmont Environmental Council's efforts to protect and restore the lands and waters of the Virginia Piedmont is our dedicated conservation team.

Their work is integrated and interrelated, and each member of the team wears many hats. But central to all of it is listening to the broad experiences, opinions and motivations of the landowners and community members in the Virginia Piedmont. Conservation Program Manager **Kim Biasioli** especially enjoys "meeting with landowners and hearing their stories" — a sentiment echoed by all of our conservation team members. "Often there is a deep rootedness and connection to the land, and it feels very rewarding to be able to help them protect it forever."

You've likely met some of our conservation staff somewhere in your community (whether you knew it or not!), but few people know the tremendous work they do behind the scenes.



PEC's Conservation Team (with legal assistant, Leigh Ross), from left to right: Mike Kane, Linnea Sherman, Lauria McShane, October Greenfield, Emily Stern, Valerie Peterson, Kim Biasioli, Keely Murphy, Michaela Weglinski, Leigh Ross, Bryn Sonnett and Ellie Young. Photo by Marco Sanchez

Years in the Making, Generations of Impact: Conservation Easements

When landowners place their property under a conservation easement, they limit future development on that property for the benefit of current and future generations. And behind every conservation easement is years of intensive work.

Sometimes landowners come to PEC already knowing they want to conserve their land — as with Rappahannock-Rapidan Conservation Program Manager **Bryn Sonnett's** recent collaboration with the Willis family to conserve Hilton Farm in Orange County (read more on page 1). Other times, our team strategically identifies conservation priorities and approaches landowners — as with Kim's work on the Blue Ridge Borderlands project in Albemarle and Greene Counties (read more on page 1). Either way, every easement starts with "sitting down and listening to what people are saying and learning what conservation means to them and how we can help them achieve it," says Director of Conservation **Mike Kane**.

Next comes multiple site visits to photograph and map the property and to identify and quantify its "conservation values": things like the quality of the soil; how many miles of waterways run through the property; how much forest, working farmland or scenic open space covers the property; or what types of wildlife habitat the property holds.

Easements also come with elements typical of any real estate transaction — appraisals, closing costs, title searches, legal fees and so on. Mike, Kim and Bryn, along with Conservation Field Represent-

atives **Keely Murphy** and **Emily Stern**, facilitate all of these, often writing applications for grants to help landowners with their costs. Along the way, they're also connecting a web of related organizations and agencies that partner with PEC and the landowner to bring the easement to fruition. By the time an easement is complete, our team might have had dozens of meetings, filed hundreds of pages of documents and traveled countless miles between site visits and county offices.

Stewarding the Land: Easement Monitoring

Once a conservation easement is complete, a land trust like PEC "holds" that easement and is responsible for ensuring the land is cared for and maintained, or stewarded, in accordance with the terms of the easement. This is especially important when conserved properties change hands.

"Like diamonds, easement stewardship is forever," says Stewardship Coordinator **Michaela Weglinski** (read more about Michaela on page 9). "We are responsible for making sure the conservation values of easement properties are upheld well beyond any of our lifetimes."

Every year, at least two PEC staff — typically Michaela and Deputy Director of Conservation **Valerie Peterson** — personally visit, or "monitor," over 100 properties, documenting the conservation values and uses of the property. They meet with landowners to answer any questions about the easement terms and to provide additional resources to support their goals for their land. Ultimately, Michaela says, easement monitoring is about supporting and col-

laborating with each landowner as part of a "larger conservation community."

Restoring the Lands and Waters: Wildlife Habitat and Tree Plantings

That collaboration continues with the habitat restoration our team does throughout the region. "I spend most of my time at work with my boots on the ground!" says Wildlife Habitat Outreach Specialist **Lauria McShane** about her work on habitat restoration.

Lauria and Wildlife Habitat Program Manager **October Greenfield** coordinate the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative (or VGBI), a program that pays farmers to adopt springtime haying and grazing practices that support the survival of nesting grassland bird species on working landscapes.

In the fall, they open the application period and encourage farmers to apply to enroll their farm in the program. Over the winter, they review applications with aerial satellite imagery and photos, and visit as many as 25 farms that might qualify to meet with landowners and farmers, map fields to determine acreage, and answer questions. Landowner agreements are signed in March, and the program runs from April 1 to July 1.

"If I'm not with a farmer in a field or a landowner looking over a map of their property, then I'm in the community doing public outreach at schools, community events and workshops," says Lauria. All this work has protected essential habitat for countless nesting grassland birds: to date, VGBI has enrolled 3,600 acres of farmland and will add even more in the 2026 season.

Plantings for the Piedmont Program Coordinator **Linnea Sherman** also follows a seasonal cycle in her work. She runs PEC's Plantings for the Piedmont program, which helps landowners improve water quality in the Potomac and Rappahannock river watersheds with mass tree plantings along streams. Linnea and Plantings for the Piedmont Assistant **Ellie Young** coordinate nearly a dozen planting projects every spring and fall, each of which might include hundreds of individual plantings.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, they write grant applications to secure the funding and plan out the plantings with landowners. They collaborate with partner organizations to source and buy hundreds of native trees and shrubs, and recruit and coordinate volunteers or contractors who plant the trees. Once the trees are in the ground, they follow up with technical assistance to ensure the trees survive. Last year, Linnea and Ellie facilitated the planting of 15,000 trees that will improve water quality and aquatic wildlife habitat for years to come. (See story on page 10.)

The Connective Fiber: Outreach and Partnerships

From birding walks to conservation "speed dating" workshops, PEC's conservation staff host and present at over 100 public events throughout the year to connect people to the many ways they can support conservation in their own backyard.

"I love inspiring new conservationists of all ages and sharing that conservation practices don't require big properties or complicated habitat restoration," says October. "It can be as simple as installing nest boxes, planting a patch of native plants, or volunteering with PEC and other conservation organizations in your local community."

That commitment to connection extends to the team's work with other organizations as well. Behind every conservation success story is usually a robust network of partnerships built on personal relationships. "Partnerships and collaboration are crucial in this work," says Bryn.

Successful collaboration is why the Virginia Piedmont is a global model for land conservation and why programs like VGBI have become national and even international models for habitat restoration. It's how PEC has become a thought leader in professional conservation spaces like Virginia's United Land Trusts and the national Land Trust Alliance, and it's what keeps staff pushing forward on new, innovative projects.

Reflecting on some exciting new easement opportunities in the works, Bryn says she is "looking forward to another great year of conservation."



Michaela Weglinski and Keely Murphy on an easement monitoring visit in Clarke County. Photo by Hugh Kenny

General Assembly Update 2026

Every day, Piedmont Environmental Council staff engage at the local, state and federal levels to shape public policy with an eye toward protecting and restoring the lands and waters of the Virginia Piedmont while building strong, more sustainable communities. The Virginia General Assembly serves as the main stage for these efforts, and as of this writing, it has adjourned its 60-day session and sent bills on to the governor’s desk for her signature, veto, or proposed amendments. With the massive data center tax break at the center of a budget agreement impasse, legislators will return April 22 to consider the governor’s actions and begin a special session the next day to reach a budget conclusion.

Read on for updates on tentative outcomes of PEC’s legislative priorities for conservation, data center reform, energy and climate, and housing and land use.

Conservation

PEC supported bills to bolster conserved lands, including **Virginia’s Great Outdoors Act**, which proposed a \$3-per-square-foot tax on data centers to establish a source of consistent, annual funding to address the long-term need for parks, trails and conservation. If passed, it would have generated up to \$250 million per year for land conservation, but the bill did not make it out of the House. We did see success with a different bill that will disincentivize public utilities from condemning conserved lands for projects such as transmission lines by requiring them to repay state tax credits and local deferred taxes on the land.

Permanent land conservation provides the platform for sustained efforts to restore and protect wildlife habitat and clean water, and in this session we saw numerous bills that complement PEC’s land conservation goals. Efforts to protect **wildlife corridors** and curb the spread of **invasive plant species** have gone to the governor’s desk, including a bill on which PEC provided comments that will limit the planting of invasive species in highway right-of-ways. Unfortunately, a bill that would have increased education about **light pollution** and dark sky preservation — a practice crucial for our local wildlife and frequently promoted by PEC staff working on habitat restoration — did not pass.

The House and Senate agreed to allow only Falls Church to **conserve and replace trees** to improve stormwater management and protect wildlife habitat when land is developed: advocates are hoping that the Governor will broaden the impact of the bill to other communities in Virginia. The House, Senate and governor also still need to come to an agreement on how the final budget will fund the **Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program**, which helps landowners pursue practices — like livestock exclusion fencing — that restore water quality and protect local streams.

PEC closely monitored other efforts to protect water quality, an issue core to the work we do through local policies and direct conservation and restoration programs like Plantings for the Piedmont. Bills to establish a **Chesapeake Bay Pay for Outcomes Fund**, which would have provided outcomes-based payments for projects that reduce nutrient and sediment pollution in the bay watershed, did not pass. However, efforts to improve **PFAS monitoring and reporting**, both imperative to conserve water quality

throughout our region and beyond, were successful. PFAS, common water pollutants, are also called “forever chemicals” as they do not break down in the environment or the human body.

Data Center Reform

This session made clear that PEC’s Virginia Data Center Reform campaign and the growing voter awareness of the costs and impacts of data centers has forced legislators to recognize they need to take action on data center reform — though they disagreed on how much action to take.

This session’s biggest surprise came in the Senate’s proposed budget, which completely eliminated the **data center sales tax exemption**. Initially predicted at only \$1.6 million dollars annually, the tax exemption has reached a startling \$1.9 billion dollars in 2025 and will only continue to grow if not eliminated or substantially limited. The House budget instead proposed tying the exemption to renewable energy commitments and energy efficiency standards. At a stalemate, the two bodies failed to pass a budget during the session, and will reconvene April 23 for that purpose.

The Senate took a strong stance supporting additional oversight, transparency, ratepayer protection, and incentives for sustainability and mitigation. Unfortunately, despite widespread public support, most of the bills that passed the Senate were quickly killed by the House.

For example, the House killed key bills that would have added **state oversight** by requiring a certificate of operation from the State Corporation Commission for large-load customers like data centers, along with bills that would have **protected other ratepayers** from unfairly subsidizing electrical infrastructure needed to power data centers.

Amendments took the teeth out of other bills that would have increased transparency around data center proposals. A bill that would have required **air quality** monitoring and public notice for data center diesel backup generator permits near schools, as well as a transition to battery storage rather than diesel generators for backup power, was watered down significantly. The final version only requires data center backup generators to meet stronger emission standards, a proposal the Department of Environmental Quality is already pursuing. Similarly, the House and Senate many times debated efforts to require data centers disclose water use, before ultimately only requiring monthly **water**



Photo by Hugh Kenny

use reporting.

In the positive column, bills that require data centers to submit a **noise assessment** during permitting and that create a voluntary **demand response program** for large load customers both passed. These will better inform localities making decisions about data center siting and could reduce some impacts of data centers on the electrical grid during peak use times. Any reductions in peak demand can help reduce the overall investment in generation and transmission.

Energy & Climate

Years of PEC’s work and engagement led to a strong outcome for energy and climate legislation. Jumping off our agrivoltaics project ribbon cutting back in October, PEC worked with our partners at Virginia Farm Bureau to develop a successful bill that defines **agrivoltaics** and provides a building block for well sited, thoughtfully developed dual-use solar in the commonwealth.

Our staff also contributed to the passed **Distributed Generation Expansion** act, which would increase the amount of distributed generation Dominion Energy must build — including 1 gigawatt of solar on previously disturbed sites such as parking lots, brownfields and minefields. PEC champions distributed generation because it doesn’t sacrifice prime agricultural soils and forests, it connects clean energy to the grid much more quickly than large-scale centralized generation, and it can save individual families and businesses tens of thousands of dollars over time on electricity bills.

We actively informed and lobbied on other successful distributed generation bills that will, once signed into law: speed up **rooftop solar permitting**; allow **balcony solar** to lower energy bills and expand clean energy access; establish a **Distributed Energy Task-force** to develop more thoughtful policy and incentives; expand **solar consumer protections** for rooftop solar contracts; enable more **parking lot solar**; and expanding **shared solar** in Dominion and Appalachian Power territories.

PEC staff also worked on a key **energy storage expansion** bill that will enable more well-sited energy storage,

making our existing grid more efficient and decreasing the need for more new transmission and gas plants. We negotiated and supported bills on **surplus interconnection**, which will prioritize clean energy projects and decrease new generation costs and other ratepayer impacts. And we actively lobbied against bills that restrict local planning decisions around **large scale solar siting**.

Housing & Land Use

This year’s session saw many bills attempting to increase the **housing supply**, particularly in urban areas. Working with our Coalition for Smarter Growth team and partners in the Virginia Conservation Network, we supported bills that will enable local governments to address **affordable housing**. We also worked for compromises balancing state direction and local government authority on housing, including **accessory dwelling units**, **minimum parking requirements** and administrative approval of **affordable housing on “faith land”** and other property-tax exempt nonprofit land. Thanks to our engagement, the final versions of the “faith” bills ensure the housing is located on existing water and sewer connections and in compliance with environmental and historic preservation requirements.

PEC asked our supporters to help defeat a bill that would have limited local governments’ power to manage growth and development in their area — including large projects like data centers — by dramatically expanding a **developer’s “vested rights,”** or protection against any new regulation. The patron withdrew this bill after the House received almost 500 letters. PEC also worked to kill a bill that would have limited any third party’s ability to **appeal a local land use decision** and rewritten precedent in Virginia. We also encouraged a bill amendment intended to address a Charlottesville-specific issue, but that would have unintentionally restricted appeals to land use cases across the state, including the ongoing Digital Gateway case in Prince William County.

PEC believes that local communities are best positioned to make planning and land use decisions, and we worked to mitigate or defeat legislation that undermined local authority.

Shenandoah Borderlands Project

Continued from cover

Cedar Mountain

By Jessica Edington, Publications Assistant

The landowner of Cedar Mountain, a newly-conserved 822-acre parcel in Albemarle County, says he traces his fondness for open space back to his days as an Eagle Scout in Roanoke, where he spent his weekends hiking the Appalachian Trail between Blacksburg and Afton. "I'm quite familiar with the terrain and the trail and the park," he said. "And when we acquired this property, it felt like a coming home."

Cedar Mountain's forestland and spring-fed creeks provide habitat for wildlife, including white-tailed deer, black bears and eastern wild turkeys, as well as rarer species like the migratory cerulean warbler and the endangered James River spiny mussel. Native brook trout, which are increasingly threatened by climate change and habitat degradation, rely on the cold headwater streams that flow through these mountain lands.

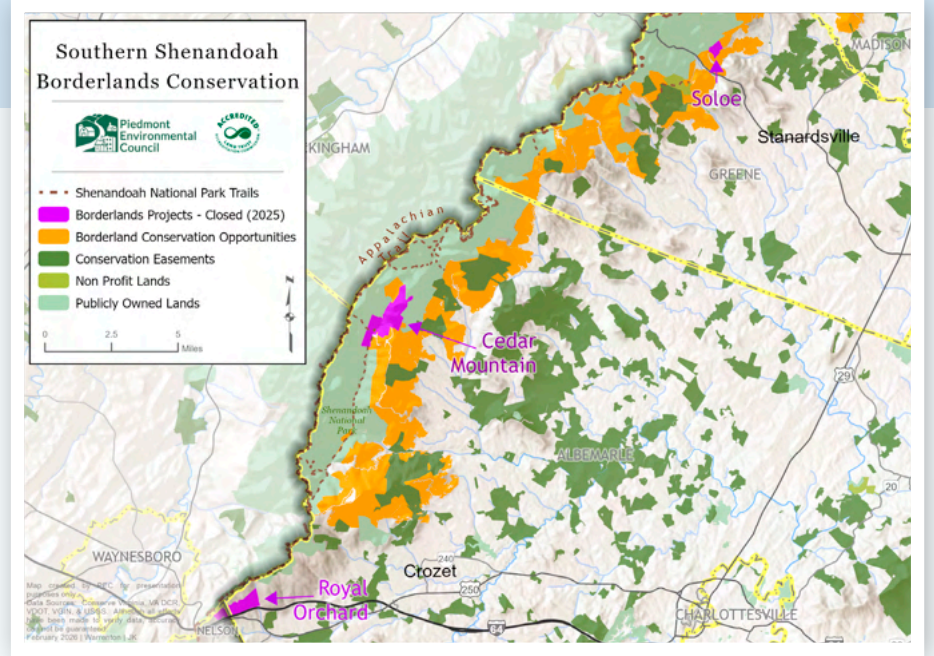
The landowner had always hoped to pursue a conservation easement for this special property, but credits PEC's

outreach and on-the-ground support for carrying that intention to reality.

"It is a pretty extraordinary piece of property virtually surrounded by the national park. Its remoteness and natural beauty, and the breadth and quality of the wildlife, is unique. We have 2 miles of the North Fork of the Moormans River and 4 miles of tributary streams that feed right into Sugar Hollow Reservoir. So protecting that is important for the region," the landowner said.

The easement protects land around a segment of the North Fork Moormans River Trail, which leads from Sugar Hollow Reservoir up to Shenandoah National Park at the top of the ridge. Hikers may not realize that many of the trails that start in the national park, like this trail, pass through private land, and that public access to these trails is made possible by the generosity of those landowners — who could choose to close off that trail access or to sell or develop their land.

To protect public access to the North



Fork Moormans River Trail, while working on the conservation easement for Cedar Mountain, PEC connected the landowner with the Shenandoah National Park Trust to donate a separate trail right-of-way easement. Through its Good Neighbors program, the Trust will take on stewardship of the portion of the trail that passes through Cedar Mountain.

"Ensuring access to public lands helps cultivate a personal relationship with the outdoors and the park," says

Good Neighbors Program Manager Elizabeth Mizell. "With the support of public and private partners, the owners of Cedar Mountain have invested in their community by protecting the land and public access to the outdoors."

The landowner is looking forward to the impact of conserving Cedar Mountain. "I think it will ensure and enrich the park experience and the public access experience for generations, hopefully for centuries, and beyond."

Royal Orchard

By Faith Schweikert, Communications Specialist

The Afton Mountain corridor is a critical transportation route for people, intertwining Interstate 64 and U.S. Route 250 over Afton Mountain. But it's also critical for

wildlife, who depend on the undeveloped land to live.

Concern for this important wildlife corridor that allows animals to move safely through increasingly developed

areas is what led to Mary Buford Hitz' interest in land conservation. "The beauty of where we are lucky enough to live will inevitably bring added pressure to land values. It's important for us to think ahead and preserve what we can," Hitz said.

The Hitz family looked

into what they could do to protect the Royal Orchard property they owned on the east side of Afton Mountain's Rockfish Gap, including building consensus among over 200 family members. Thanks to PEC's work with the family to develop a conservation project and apply for funding from the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program, the 200 family members — spearheaded by Andrew Carter and Alex Bocock — were able to permanently protect 400 acres of forestland and open space bordering Shenandoah National Park, Skyline Drive and the Appalachian Trail through a conservation easement held by the Virginia Department of Forestry.

The land, which is primarily forested, provides an invaluable buffer between Interstate 64 and the adjacent national park, while also improving climate resiliency through carbon sequestration and flood mitigation. Royal Orchard contains the headwaters and a combined 4,200 feet of stream frontage on four tributaries of Stockton Creek, all of which ultimately flow into the South Fork Rivanna Reservoir. Its conservation helps protect

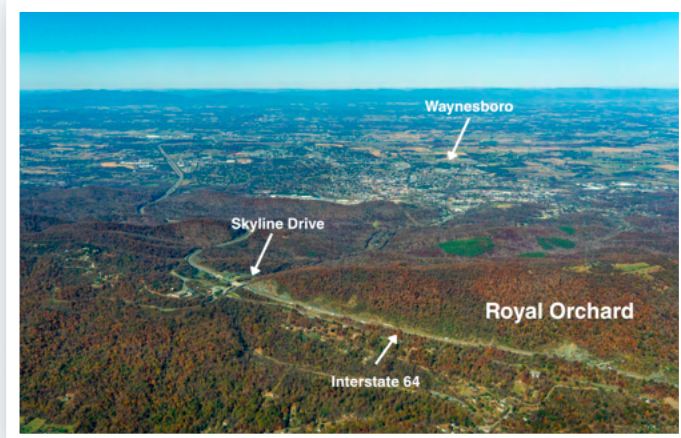
the public water supply for Albemarle, Charlottesville and other downstream communities.

Contiguous undeveloped land provides natural habitat for the variety of wildlife and plant species that exist in this area, including two state-endangered bat species and one of Virginia's most significant autumn raptors.

"There's plenty going on in those woods," Hitz said. "Those who hike in the area have seen bears, wildcats, foxes and all kinds of birds and other species."

Her family's connection to the land began when Hitz' grandmother, who at the time had five children under 10 years old in Richmond, saw a classified ad in the newspaper for an apple orchard. She asked a friend to ride up and take a look for her. He returned to say "it was the most difficult place to get to and also the most beautiful view he had ever seen."

Hitz says her grandmother took the last of their money, purchased the property site-unseen and "lived happily ever after...My mother [then] cared deeply for the land and passed that on to me."



The Royal Orchard property on the east side of Afton Mountain's Rockfish Gap sits at the critical juncture of Interstate 64, U.S. Route 250 and Shenandoah National Park. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Oak Hill ... State Park?

John McCarthy, Senior Advisor & Director of Strategic Partnerships

At the start of the 2026 General Assembly, legislators submitted no fewer than three bills to make the extraordinary Oak Hill property in Loudoun County Virginia's newest state park. As a state park, Oak Hill would provide 1,200 acres of publicly accessible open space in the northern Piedmont, opening outdoor recreational opportunities for the millions of visitors to and residents of the region.

After combining Delegate Alfonso Lopez's original HB 239 with Delegate John McAuliff's HB 500, the latter bill moved smoothly through the House of Delegates, passing 98-0. Successful passage in

the Senate was more elusive, however. The Senate Finance and Appropriations Committee voted 14-0 to defer action on HB 500 until the 2027 General Assembly session. The same committee did not take a vote on Senator Russet Perry's SB 157, a Senate companion to Delegate McAuliff's bill.

Now what happens? Getting Oak Hill over the finish line will be an enormous lift, requiring cooperation on the final budget agreement between hesitant Senate and House Appropriations Committee members and the governor's office, but PEC is hopeful that 2026 will see this important conservation priority accomplished.



Hopefully soon to be Virginia's next state park, Oak Hill in Loudoun County would provide 1,240 acres of publicly accessible open space in the northern Piedmont. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Hilton Farm: A Key Piece of the Conservation Puzzle in the Rappahannock-Rapidan Watershed

Continued from cover

Clean Water: A Big Piece of the Conservation Puzzle

For PEC, two words can sum up this easement's community impact: Clean water. Conserving and restoring the Piedmont's lands and waters, including working farms and prime agricultural soils in the Rappahannock watershed, is a key focus area of PEC's Strategic Plan.

And protecting water resources was a priority for both PEC and the Willis family at Hilton Farm. Our farms and communities need a safe and abundant water supply to thrive and grow. Clean water from Hilton Farm's 3 miles of Hen & Bacon Run, Barbour Run and their tributaries drains into the Rapidan River, eventually joining the Rappahannock River, important public drinking water sources for downstream communities like the City of Fredericksburg.

The good news is that the Willis family had already worked with the Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District — which is a co-holder of the ALE easement with PEC — to implement

many conservation practices on the property. "I cannot overstate the value of the Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District's role and expertise," PEC Rappahannock-Rapidan Conservation Program Manager Bryn Sonnett said. And, Bryn added, the Willis family "did more in preparation for the easement," adding several sections of streamside fencing that helped meet the easement's water quality protection goal by limiting livestock access to the farm's streams and riparian areas.

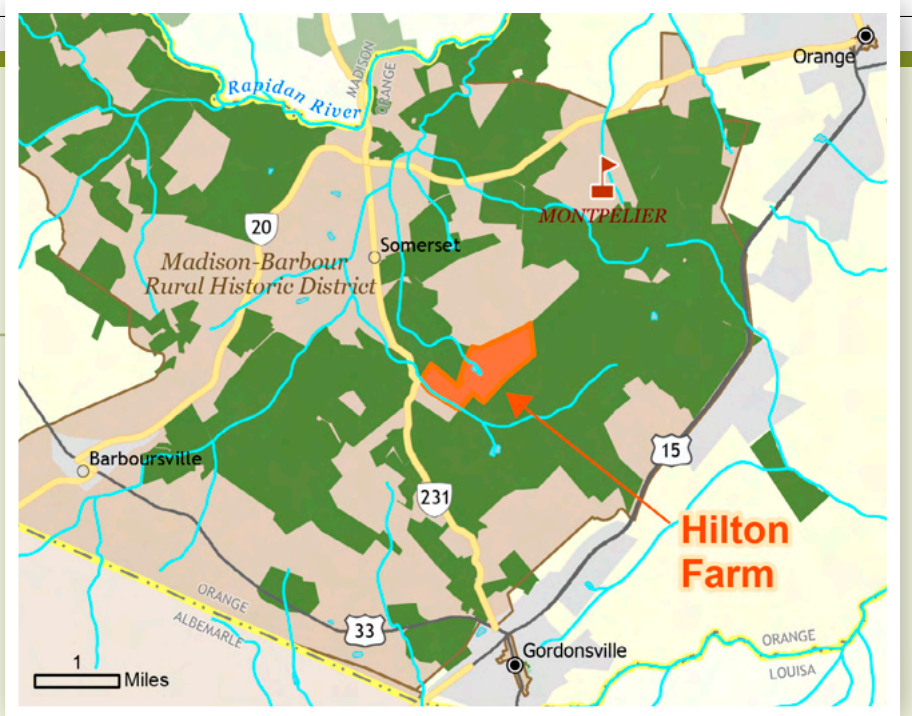
ALE Program: The Financial Piece of the Puzzle

The focus of conservation easements can vary depending on the type of easement. ALE easements are specifically designed to protect the long-term viability of the nation's food supply by preventing conversion of productive working lands to non-agricultural uses. They help ensure that: 1) owners can pass their farms on to future generations, keeping the land in the family; and 2) its primary use will always be for agriculture.

PEC's work with the Willis family serves as a model of how the ALE program can be used to leverage public and private funding to protect high-quality farmland in the Upper Rappahannock watershed and beyond. Along with \$550,000 in ALE program funds, PEC secured a \$237,500 grant from the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation (administered by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation) to purchase the conservation easement below its appraised fair market value. Mike and Judy donated the remain-



The Willis family: Mike and Judy Willis (right), with Wesley (left center), Wesley's wife Mandi (far left), and their sons Grant and Eli (front). Photo courtesy of Judy Willis



Map of southwest Orange County. The Hilton Farm property (shaded in orange) is surrounded by other conserved lands (shaded in green) in the Madison-Barbour Rural Historic District.

ing value, which may be eligible for transferable credits under Virginia's Land Preservation Tax Credit Program. Generous support from The Volgenau Foundation for PEC's Rappahannock-Rapidan Conservation Initiative helped cover expenses related to completing the easement transaction.

Preparing the Next Generation of Farmers

Passing a farm to the next generation is an increasingly important part of conservation stories in the Piedmont. The ALE program will help the Willis family keep Hilton Farm in the family. Judy's son and Mike's stepson, Wesley, and Wesley's wife, Mandi, will one day take over the majority of the operation.

"The land succession aspect of an easement is important, especially for working farms," said Bryn. "It's often a question of how to make farming appealing and viable for future generations of the family. If you inherit a farm business that's weighed down in debt, it is a much tougher proposition. It needs to be a realistic investment. The ALE easement can help set up the next generation for future success."

Benefiting the Community, One ALE at a Time

Since 2018, PEC has secured \$6.8 million through the ALE program to match other public and private funding for the purchase of conservation easements on 10 working farms, totaling more than 3,560 acres.

With the successful completion of the Hilton Farm ALE project, the Willis family are helping PEC build momentum for conservation in a way that is having a ripple effect beyond the farm. "This family is becoming a leader and catalyst for conserving productive farmland in Orange County," said Bryn. "They've been able to work with us to utilize the ALE program in a manner that conserves land and water with significant benefit to the public, while also meeting their long-term goals. Now, they can be a resource for other farmers looking for ways to conserve their property and take advantage of proven farm succession tools."

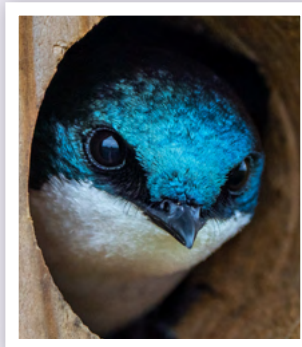
Mike Kane, PEC's director of conservation, added, "With ALE, we have another tool out there to help farmers conserve, invest and provide land succession. More and more landowners are coming to us as a result."

Knowledge Nook

How to be a friend to birds this spring

One of spring's greatest joys is watching nesting birds. But as Virginia loses open spaces to conversion, many species of birds struggle to find a safe place to raise their young. Luckily, you can support native bird species in your own backyard, whether you live in a residential neighborhood or a rural area.

- **Install species-specific nest boxes** to provide a safe place for birds to shelter from predators and raise their young.
- **Remove invasive** plant species and **plant natives** such as warm season grasses, forbs (flowering plants), shrubs and fruit and nut bearing trees to provide food and shelter for birds.
- **Leave snags** (dead standing trees) whenever they don't pose a safety risk so cavity-nesting birds can use old woodpecker holes to build their nests.
- **Raise the blades** on mowers and tractors to 8 inches or higher to avoid destroying grassland bird nests.



Tree Swallow Photo by Hugh Kenny

LEARN MORE

- Find species-specific nest box guides — including size, placement, materials and predator deterrents — at Cornell University's nestwatch.org **Right Bird, Right House** directory.
- Visit vagrasslandbirds.org to find more best management practices from the **Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative** — a PEC partner program that empowers landowners and producers in 16 counties to manage their lands for the benefit of birds and farms.



Photo by Hugh Kenny

Volunteer at the Community Farm!

Come enjoy the spring weather while helping us 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.

On the Ground

Albemarle & Charlottesville

- ▶ The newly-adopted Albemarle Comprehensive Plan (AC44) went into effect Jan. 1, 2026, and the county's implementation of AC44 will include drafting a new zoning ordinance, updating Development Area neighborhood master plans and other actions outlined in the final plan. PEC is focused on promoting the funding of Albemarle's Acquisition of Conservation Easements program and advocating for the county's Biodiversity Action Plan update and new Rural Area Land Use Plan.
- ▶ PEC is monitoring two transmission line proposals driven by out-of-control data center growth and engaging communities in their approval processes. The projects include two 230 kilovolt rebuilds within existing right-of-ways: one extending from Dooms in Augusta County to Charlottesville, and the other extending from Charlottesville to the Gordonsville substation in northeast Albemarle County. Our concerns include visual impacts to historic and scenic resources and construction impacts to sensitive natural resources.
- ▶ Just south of the county border, PEC engaged with community partners to fight the proposed second Tenaska gas plant. A Harvard University research lab found that the new plant will exacerbate the health and environmental impacts of the existing Tenaska gas plant, and will expose nearly 4 million people in Fluvanna, Albemarle and central Virginia to increased air pollution. Unfortunately, the Fluvanna Board of Supervisors approved the special use permit.

Clarke

- ▶ In March, Clarke County staff published the first draft of the new Rural Lands Plan on the county's website. PEC is reviewing the draft text and will comment as needed. We will also attend two public input sessions: **April 6** at the Boyce Fire Hall and **April 9** at the Bluemont Fire and Rescue Social Hall.
- ▶ During its January meeting, the Board of Supervisors heard updates on water levels. The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality has elevated the county's Drought Watch status to a Drought Warning after Clarke ended 2025 with a 9.5 inch annual rainfall deficit. Nine of the county's 13 drought elevation regions have experienced less than 60% of normal precipitation since Oct. 1, 2025.
- ▶ State Route 7 safety improvements continue to be a key focus for the Board of Supervisors, highlighted by a fatal crash on Feb. 2, 2026 at the intersection of Blue Ridge Mountain Road and Route 7 on the Clarke and Loudoun county line.

Culpeper

- ▶ Strata Energy has applied for a conditional use permit for a large, utility-scale solar facility, called Maroon Solar, on Raccoon Ford Road in southern Culpeper. This is Strata's fourth such application for this property after the first three failed. While PEC remains a supporter of solar, we have several

concerns about the site of this project — which features both shallow rock and deep, heavy clays — and about Strata Energy, which has a history of erosion problems on their construction sites. Although the Planning Commission recommended denial of the project in March, Strata will bring its proposal to the Board of Supervisors April 7.

- ▶ The Town and County of Culpeper have received site plans for several approved data centers, including the Culpeper Technology Campus and Copper Ridge — both owned by STACK Infrastructure — as well as Edgecore, Keyser Farm, and a new by-right data center adjacent to the existing Equinix data centers. Approval of these plans is administrative and does not require a public hearing. Construction for some of the projects is likely to begin later this year.

Fauquier

- ▶ Though PEC and many others attempted to convince the Commonwealth Transportation Board that a proposed bridge replacement at Broad Run on Interstate 66, directly in front of the historic Chapman-Beverly Mill, is both unnecessarily large and far too expensive, the project will proceed and is advertised for bid in fall 2026. Virginia Department of Transportation intends to maintain existing traffic flows during construction by adding significant width to that section of I-66. No other bridge project in its portfolio is similarly oversized.
- ▶ The proposed Amazon data center project in Warrenton is back in the news. The Warrenton Board of Zoning Appeals deferred its decision regarding the applicant's vested rights until a separate but related case is heard by the Circuit Court. Briefs are being filed and the court will hear oral arguments in that case June 15. It appears the applicant is prepared to appeal the Board of Zoning Appeals decision all the way to the Virginia Supreme Court if necessary.
- ▶ Remington Tech Park data center developers submitted a rezoning request to add gas turbines for primary power production to their existing approved data center permits — the first request of its kind in Fauquier from a data center developer to produce its own power. The Planning Commission recommended denial of the application in a 3-2 vote, a decision PEC supports because of the power plant's potential air and noise emissions. The application goes to the Board of Supervisors in April.
- ▶ Gigaland developers have returned with the anticipated scaled-down version of their data center design. Public sentiment toward this project is poor after a hard-fought battle by the applicant during the first application process. The new application is under review with Community Development and could be presented to the Planning Commission in April. PEC continues to monitor the status of the application and will weigh in at the appropriate time.
- ▶ The Town of Remington is making progress on its comprehensive plan update. A committee of community and regional leaders, residents, and PEC staff is in the process of collecting data and will soon be ready to take more extensive community input.

Greene

- ▶ Greene County is moving forward with construction of its water supply project. The construction includes a raw water main pipe that will bring water from the Rapidan River to a new reservoir and a raw water intake and pump station that will be placed in the Rapidan riverbed to collect water during times of high water. As the Virginia Piedmont continues to experience extended periods of drought, water supply infrastructure is a priority for the county and PEC.
- ▶ Both the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors have undertaken multiple work sessions — including joint sessions — to update regulations for agritourism facilities, including farm wineries, breweries, distilleries and event venues. PEC's primary concerns about these types of land uses are the impacts from noise/sound, traffic, size of buildings and structures, depletion of groundwater and frequency of events. PEC has provided comments advocating for rural area protections and best practices for regulation of such facilities.
- ▶ The Central Virginia Partnership for Economic Development has hired a consultant to complete a strategic plan to guide economic development along the U.S. Route 29 corridor extending from Fauquier County through Greene County to the City of Charlottesville. According to the partnership, "Central Virginia is poised to become a nationally recognized Innovation Corridor for biotech, digital technologies and national security." The strategic roadmap will identify the corridor's competitive advantages in biotech and digital technologies (data science, AI, autonomy, advanced materials, cybersecurity, etc.) with commercial and national security applications.

Loudoun

- ▶ PEC continues to monitor the many data center applications in Loudoun's pipeline, including the ongoing conversion of "flex industrial space" and encroachment on residential areas. In particular, PEC has organized a response to the Leesburg Gateway data center proposal, which was deferred from its January public hearing date with no rescheduled date yet.
- ▶ In December, PEC encouraged public comment for the Golden-to-Mars transmission line case, and in February, PEC submitted closing arguments on the case. No ruling has been made yet, but in total, about 1,400 written comments were submitted on this case and almost 300 public witnesses spoke!
- ▶ PEC has also provided comments for a county-wide Electrical Infrastructure Plan to proactively manage transmission siting. After the Board of Supervisors adopted best practice guidelines in February, Phase 2 focuses on long-term planning and identifying potential routes as data centers increase the need for more power via new high-voltage transmission corridors.
- ▶ The Board of Supervisors' Transportation and Land Use Committee's year-long stakeholder process on the Western Loudoun Uses and Standards zoning ordinance amendment came

On the Ground

to a close, and the committee directed staff to draft new zoning language. Along the way, PEC submitted detailed comments.

- Stunningly, despite input from the public, PEC and many partners, as well as the county staff's excellent motions, the committee voted to grant ABC-licensed businesses unlimited, unrestricted, by-right private parties, while maintaining only 25-foot setbacks for outdoor party spaces at ABC businesses and overnight stay venues alike.
- For the Mountainside Overlay District, the same committee recommended reducing the protective buffer for ridge features and springs to 100 feet (from 300 feet) and allowing permit-free driveway repairs and construction of structures up to 600 square feet (larger than a two car garage).

The Transportation and Land Use Committee recommendations will go to the full Board of Supervisors for final votes at the board's May and June meetings. PEC staff will keep you informed, and we encourage any residents concerned about their quality of life in western Loudoun to attend. Another good way to make your voice heard is to add a public comments on the official project page at loudoun.gov/6088/Western-Loudoun-Rural-Uses-and-Standards.

- PEC has worked with partners to create a fact-sheet highlighting the significant cost, timing and impact issues of the proposed U.S. Route 15 bypass around Lucketts. The Board of Supervisors had planned to vote on two possible bypass routes this quarter, but we are advocating a more timely, less costly solution that preserves the area's rural character and provides corridor traffic calming measures like those found along U.S. Route 50 and state Route 9.

Madison

- Work continues on the proposed Rapidan River-Clark Mountain Rural Historic District. PEC's consultant, the Fairfield Foundation, has completed the full inventory of resources within the proposed district and is finalizing the narrative portion of the application for the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. PEC hosted a

meeting in February to update the community and remains hopeful the application will be approved in 2026. The historic district, which includes over 40,000 acres of mostly intact agricultural landscape in Madison, Culpeper and Orange counties, would be one of the largest rural historic districts in Virginia.

Orange

- In December, the Board of Supervisors approved a Technology Zoning District that allows practically any parcel to be rezoned for data centers. The new ordinance does include some provisions intended to avoid or mitigate impacts of data center development, and it will ensure a public input process for future proposals. However, the maximum-flexibility approach approved by the board does not include any cap on acreage or on how many parcels countywide could be rezoned for data centers.

In a separate action that PEC fully supports, the board will soon consider removing data centers as a by-right use in the Industrial Zoning District, which would ensure that any future Orange County data center application would be required to seek a rezoning to Technology and a special use permit. No data centers are currently proposed in Orange County; PEC will closely monitor land use applications and alert the public should a data center be proposed.

- The Town of Orange amended its zoning ordinance in February, removing data centers as a by-right use and instead requiring a special use permit. The action will ensure a public input process for any data center application. This was a much-needed change, but PEC believes that hyperscale data centers should not be allowed anywhere in the town at all. Towns are meant to be pedestrian-oriented, human-scaled places for people to live, work and play. They are land-constrained, and the limited space should be used for housing, retail and public places. In the current data center market, any proposal would likely be over 80 feet tall, over 100,000 square feet and accompanied by new 230-kilovolt transmission lines and associated substations, none of which is conducive to a town environment. The Town will soon be considering updates to the definition of "data center" in the zoning

ordinance, and PEC is urging changes that would require a data center applicant to seek a separate special use permit for any planned on-site power plant.

- Last year, regional grid operator PJM announced a slate of new gas power plant proposals across the state, including one in Orange County. In January 2026, after a period of uncertainty when almost no information was publicly available, even in response to multiple Virginia Freedom of Information Act requests by PEC, PJM withdrew the proposed 1.2 gigawatt gas power plant from consideration. It was one of 51 projects PJM has attempted to fast-track to meet energy demands driven by data centers.

Rappahannock

- In January, First Energy held an open house in Sperryville for the Page-Sperryville 138 kilovolt transmission line upgrade. This is a wreck-and-rebuild of the existing 40-year-old transmission line between Luray and Sperryville. PEC is not opposed to the project since the transmission line and substation equipment are nearing the end of their service life; however, we are concerned about the potential viewshed impacts for the Sperryville Historic District and Shenandoah National Park. First Energy plans to submit this project to the State Corporation Commission in summer 2026.
- In March, the Board of Supervisors approved an amendment to the code of ordinance that requires all new and expanding substations to obtain a special exception from the county. PEC strongly supported this amendment.

State

- PEC is an intervenor in the Dominion Energy net metering case with the State Corporation Commission, in which Dominion has petitioned the SCC to slash the credit rate for small-scale solar owners. To start the SCC hearing, there were over 1,200 public written comments and 50 individual public testimonies in favor of retaining current rates. The SCC decision will be announced by May 1, 2026.

Pop Quiz

QUESTION

Virginia has five International Dark Sky Parks, and two of them are located in the Piedmont. Which of these two parks are designated as International Dark Sky Parks?

ANSWER

b) Sky Meadows State Park and d) Rappahannock County Park

Though the Piedmont has many spectacular parks and natural places, only Sky Meadows State Park and Rappahannock County Park hold the distinction of International Dark Sky Parks as certified by DarkSky International, a nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing light pollution for wildlife and communities. These are parks with exceptional starry nights and protected nocturnal environments. Other International Dark Sky Parks in Virginia include James River State Park, Staunton River State Park and Natural Bridge State Park.

Light pollution disrupts the natural rhythms of nocturnal species and disturbs migratory patterns for birds and other wildlife. Artificial light also impacts human health by affecting sleep quality, which can lead to chronic diseases. By protecting dark skies, we not only can see the breathtaking expanse of the stars, but we also safeguard the health of ecosystems and communities.

You can help reduce light pollution by ensuring any outdoor lights are shielded and directed toward the ground, not the sky. Learn more at darksky.org



ABOVE: Shielded, ground-facing outdoor lighting in warm colors helps prevent light pollution. Photo by Cris DiNoto on Unsplash

Who's Protecting the Piedmont?

The Virginia Piedmont is one of the most breathtaking places in the country, with exceptional natural resources, productive farms and forests, and a landscape steeped in history. Nearly a half-million acres of conserved lands strengthen our quality of life and sense of place and serve as the foundation for well-functioning ecosystems, a strong local food supply and a refuge for a healthy variety of flora and fauna.

But this region isn't what it is by chance. It's taken the careful planning and work of countless people and organizations determined to preserve its beauty and irreplaceable gifts of nature for generations to come. Here, we highlight three of those people, who are protecting the Piedmont by growing local food, stewarding conservation easements and donating to make PEC's work possible.

Sara Gouda

COMMUNITY FARM VOLUNTEER

By Catherine Fisher, Community Farm Assistant Manager

On a humid July morning, first-time volunteer Sara Gouda joined a group of volunteers gathered at PEC's Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows. Sara found the Community Farm on a local volunteer website and was excited to work outside and learn how to plant and harvest. "PEC caught my attention most of all when I read that the farm donates almost 100% of the produce," she said. "That really hit close to home, because when I was younger, we were always utilizing food banks. So it meant a lot to me that I could have this opportunity to give back in that way that was given to me."

In 2025, the Community Farm grew and donated over 57,000 pounds of fruits, vegetables and herbs to local hunger relief organizations. By growing food for community members and practicing sustainable land management on the farm, volunteers support the Piedmont in a multitude of ways.

"I like that [volunteering] is different everytime," Sara says. "Some days I'm harvesting beets, and other days I'm weeding in the greenhouse." She fondly recalls another day pruning tomatoes in the caterpillar tunnel while learning from farm staff, a moment that reminds her of her childhood STEM classes in Fairfax.

"In elementary school, we were always finding ways to be outdoors and get our hands dirty," she says. "We did this project called 'Caring for our Watersheds' and went out to Sugarland Run where we did a river dance and collected fish."

She observed insects, raised and released tadpoles, and saw turtles — her favorite animal — basking in the sun. Her appreciation for nature started at a young age, but Sara says the farm brings out the hands-on, outdoor-exploring version of herself that can often fade in adulthood.

With her quickness to smile and ability to strike up a conversation, she's excited for the upcoming season and hopes to volunteer with a partner organization that receives the farm's produce.

"Having a local food system makes it a lot more accessible," she says. "It's more boots-on-the-ground, and you can have a direct impact. You're picking the fruits and vegetables with your own hands and it's going straight to these people. It just makes it mean a lot more."

Volunteer season at the Community Farm started in March, empowering volunteers to make a direct impact in the local community. If you find yourself working alongside Sara, say hello, and get to know one of the many incredible people protecting the Piedmont.



Photo by Lea Justice

Emily Schmitz

PEC DONOR

By Nora Seilheimer, Director of Advancement

For Emily Schmitz, the Virginia Piedmont is more than just a landscape; it's a place that has shaped her life. Currently a double major in English and Environmental Studies at Davidson College, Emily's academic interests are deeply rooted in childhood memories of exploring Shenandoah National Park and the clear waters of Sugar Hollow with her family.

Her love of these special places and experiences has motivated her to learn more about them and what is needed to protect these and other natural resources. As the climate crisis became a concern for Emily, she recalls asking, "How could I, as a middle schooler, make an impact on this huge global issue?" Eager to find a way to turn her concern into action, she asked her parents for guidance. They encouraged her to look closer to home, focusing on organizations tackling environmental issues at the local level. This led her to The Piedmont Environmental Council, and at the age of 12, Emily decided to donate a portion of her monthly allowance to support PEC's mission.

Through her involvement with PEC, Emily has developed a deep appreciation for PEC's work in protecting natural systems while also supporting the communities within them. "We are not extricable from the environment," Emily explains, highlighting her belief that environmental health and community health are the same. And she's carried those lessons with her to college.

Her appreciation of community-based conservation led to a summer internship with the Town of Davidson where she helped track the town's progress towards its climate action goals and developed programming for the town's summer camp's "Sustainability Day." She also participated in a project placing markers on trees sharing the trees' environmental and economic value. This effort turned a simple walk down the street into a lesson on the tangible value of nature for the visitors and residents of Davidson.

At Davidson College, Emily wrote an article for the school newspaper about the environmental impacts of data center development and through that experience gained a greater appreciation for PEC's leadership on the issue.

While Emily misses Virginia, living in North Carolina for school has provided her with a broader perspective on environmental issues. "As I learn more about how change happens, I see how change at the local level is incredibly impactful and can create a model for how to create solutions for larger problems. Not only is PEC making a difference at the local level, but it has also helped establish this area of Virginia as a model for community-centered land use planning and conservation for the rest of the country. I am pleased to support PEC." Thanks, Emily!



Photo by Emily Schmitz

Michaela Weglinski

PEC STEWARDSHIP COORDINATOR

By Jessica Edington, Publications Assistant

For Michaela Weglinski, protecting the Piedmont through her work as PEC's stewardship coordinator is all about connections.

"I enjoy bringing resources to landowners and helping connect our private landowner community with opportunities for land management practices that benefit both them and the natural resources of their conserved lands," says Michaela. "I'm excited when they're excited. Together, we share a passion for protecting and stewarding these lands that we all love in perpetuity."

The protection that conservation easements provide is active, not passive. As an accredited land trust, PEC "holds" the easements on over 100 properties

and is required to monitor each of those properties every year to ensure the conservation values of that land — things like wildlife habitat, prime agricultural soils, scenic viewsheds and unimpaired streams — are cared for in a way that's consistent with the easement.

So, for much of the year, Michaela spends her time in the field, documenting observations and conditions of the property and meeting with landowners, land managers and conservation



Photo by Michaela Weglinski

partners along the way.

But that's not all. "I'm a representative for both the conserved land and the land trust, and that means ensuring PEC is meeting our obligations to protect the land as well. And then I'm also working with the landowners who inhabit those lands," says Michaela.

"Recently, for example, I met with a landowner in Madison County who had removed invasive bamboo from their property. Now, they're looking at options for replacing that invasive bamboo with native trees along their stream, so I connected them with PEC's Plantings for the Piedmont Program," says Michaela. (Read more about Plantings for the Piedmont

on page 10.)

During a monitoring visit last year, a landowner in Albemarle County told Michaela he hoped to see quail on his property again someday. He had spotted them in the area many years ago but had not seen any in recent years. Fortunately, PEC's wildlife habitat outreach specialist Lauria McShane was out in the field with Michaela that day, and suggested a few native tree and shrub species for the landowner to consider planting on the property to make it more inviting for quail.

"I really like meeting with landowners and finding out what's special about their property," says Michaela. "Most of them are very proud of their preserved lands and many have really interesting stories about properties they grew up on or that were passed down through previous generations. With every field visit, I'm grateful for the opportunity to do my part to protect the Piedmont."

15,000 Reasons to Celebrate: Plantings, Partnerships and Protecting Water

By Linnea Sherman, *Plantings for the Piedmont & Natural Resources Restoration Program Manager*

The end of every Plantings for the Piedmont season comes with a sigh of relief. New native trees and shrubs are in the ground; landowners can look out at the tangible result of months of planning and work; and PEC's Plantings for the Piedmont team and partners get some much-needed time at our desks after months of field work and events. After compiling the data for 2025's spring and fall plantings, I sat staring at my screen.

Could that be right? Did we actually plant 15,000 trees last year?

I reviewed the numbers again, and then again. We most certainly did — a record high. And none of it would have been possible without collaboration and partnerships.

It Takes A Village to Plant A Buffer

How does a planting project even get started?

Sometimes PEC is the first organization invited to a property, and we bring in other partners. Sometimes, we're introduced to landowners by other organizations who were first on the scene. In still other cases, neighbor recommendations are the reason more riparian buffers — the forested areas along rivers, streams, creeks and other waterways that are essential for protecting clean water — get restored.

One of my favorite examples of collaboration and partnerships culminating into a riparian buffer restoration planting is a project we did last fall at Oakendale Farm in The Plains.

On a warm day earlier that summer, I visited Oakendale with a group of technical service providers who help landowners steward their lands. The farm is picturesque: sprawling hayfields, pastures and forest with a stretch

of Bartons Creek — a tributary of the Little River, Lower Goose Creek and Potomac River watersheds — and several ponds.

As we walked the property, our group talked through landowners Frank and Tamara's vision for the land and how our programs might support their goals. Justin Proctor from Virginia Working Landscapes had organized the visit and brought together representatives from PEC, the Goose Creek Association, the John Marshall Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Virginia Department of Forestry.

Justin, who had already been working at Oakendale to restore grassland bird habitat, pointed out a stretch of Bartons Creek that he'd had his eye on for years. Too little tree canopy, eroded banks and heavy sedimentation created what Justin called "a perfect example of a bad riparian buffer." Already, Frank and Tamara had stopped mowing up to the stream to allow vegetation to stabilize the streambanks, but they wanted to take the next step toward improving water quality here and downstream.

With so many organizations dedicated to clean water and habitat restoration together at Oakendale Farm, we developed a plan.

- Frank and Tamara enrolled in a riparian forest buffer cost-share program with the John Marshall Soil and Water Conservation District;
- The Virginia Department of Forestry mapped out the plan for planting nearly 3,000 native trees and shrubs on the roughly 10-acre buffer;
- PEC worked with Friends of the Rappahannock and Shenandoah Habitats to get the trees in the ground;

- With support from a Small Watershed Grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, PEC paid the upfront costs of the tree installation and the funding gap not covered by cost-share;
- PEC worked with the Rappahannock Conservation Nursery to source live stakes (tree cuttings);
- Volunteers with the Goose Creek Association installed the trees;
- And for the next three years, additional groups will support maintenance activities.

In other words, many hands made this project possible, and none of it would have happened without the landowners' willingness to engage with us on conservation and restoration opportunities.

"It is really inspiring to meet landowners so motivated by — and then ultimately so rewarded by — their efforts to protect and improve wildlife habitat, watershed quality, soil health and regenerative agriculture," says Justin. "When we set out as a community to protect the rural character of our region, this type of land and water stewardship really embodies that goal."

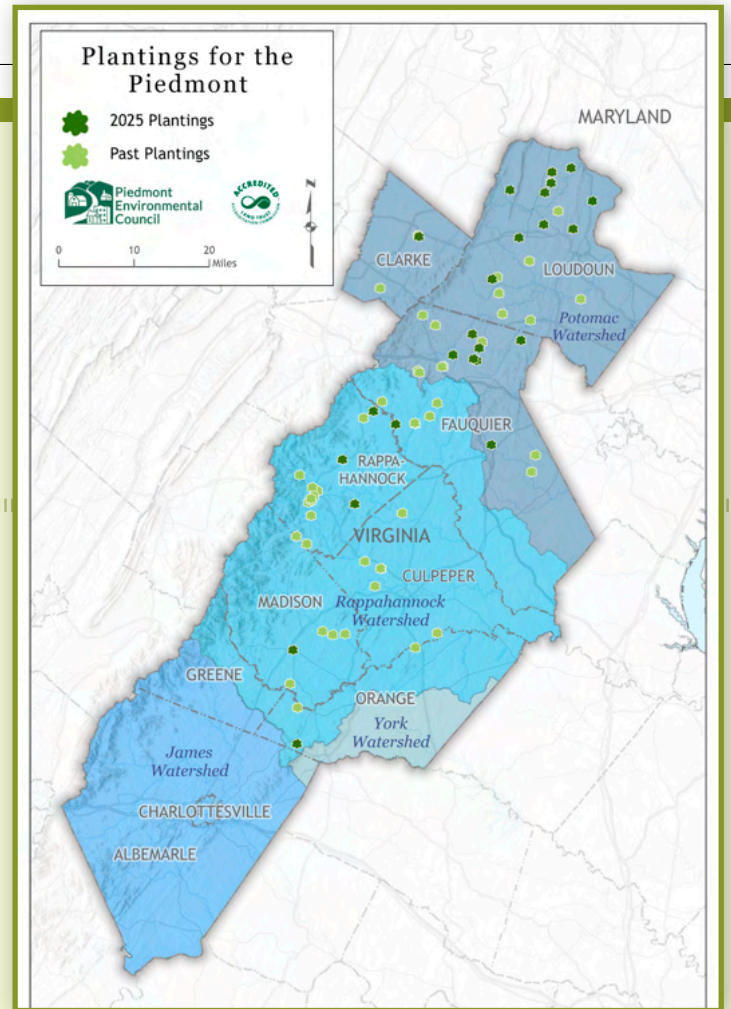
We all now get to watch over the coming years as the buffers grow into corridors of native forest, benefitting local wildlife and improving water quality on the farm and for their neighbors downstream on the Little River, the Lower Goose Creek and the Potomac River.

Tree Plantings, Clean Water and the Chesapeake Bay

So, why does PEC plant trees anyway?

Because riparian forest buffers are crucial: they stabilize stream banks, reduce erosion and flooding, filter pollutants, create wildlife habitat, cool the water for aquatic life — and, ultimately, support clean water, which is the lifeblood of our land, communities and economy.

Supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Chesapeake Bay Stewardship Fund, PEC's Plantings for the Piedmont program



In a record-breaking year for PEC's Plantings for the Piedmont program, we planted 15,000 trees across 29 properties in 2025, restoring 52 acres of stream buffers to improve water quality across the Piedmont.



Volunteers waded into Bartons Creek during a "live staking" at Oakendale Farm, when tree cuttings are staked into the ground. Once grown, these trees will stabilize the heavily-eroded stream banks. Photo by Lea Justice

covers the costs of technical assistance, project design, materials, installation, and three years of paid maintenance for riparian buffers and "upland" agricultural tree planting projects. Our work sits at the essential nexus between land conservation and water quality.

Every planted tree plays a role in the restoration of our local watersheds, and, ultimately, the Chesapeake Bay — the largest estuary in the United States, with a watershed spanning six states and the District of Columbia. Along with numerous federal partners, each of these states has voluntarily signed on to the recently revised Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement to restore, conserve and protect the watershed — a commitment PEC shares.

A recent report found that both forest and urban tree canopy cover has continued to

decline across the watershed. In response, the revised Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement sets a target to plant and maintain 7,500 acres of buffers annually through 2040. That's about 2.25 million trees.

I find those numbers a little daunting, but I'm heartened by examples like Oakendale Farm, which shows that collaboration is essential to meeting these goals. Not one of the 15,000 trees PEC planted last year happened in isolation. As a native plant lover, I find it so rewarding to see villages come together to get our Plantings for the Piedmont projects in the ground and then to watch the buttonbush (a personal favorite), oaks, river birch and dogwoods — to name a few — emerge from their tubes, knowing they're going to provide clean water and habitat benefits today and in the years to come.



A riparian buffer planted at a farm along Cromwell's Run in spring 2025. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Disclaimer: The views and conclusions contained in this article are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as representing the opinions or policies of the U.S. Government or the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and its funding sources. Mention of trade names or commercial products does not constitute their endorsement by the U.S. Government, or the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation or its funding sources.

Out & About

Active Mobility Summit



Photo by Jason Esple

PEC staff and volunteers with Virginia's first gentleman Adam Spanberger at PEC's sixth annual Active Mobility Summit. This year, the summit brought together over 200 attendees across two days to find ways to improve walking, biking, running and everyday access to nature in Charlottesville and Albemarle County.

Kestrel Box Installations



Photo by Hugh Kenny

At Woodberry Forest School, PEC Wildlife Habitat Outreach Specialist Lauria McShane and Old Rag Master Naturalist members gave presentations on grassland birds and taught students how to install American Kestrel boxes.

Advocates for Small-Scale Solar



Photo by Jessica Sims, Virginia Conservation Network

PEC's Ashish Kapoor (on the right), alongside partners from Solar United Neighbors, Vote Solar, Sierra Club, Give Solar, and Advanced Energy United, spoke at a press conference to kick off the State Corporation Commission hearing regarding Dominion Energy's request to reduce the value of net metering payments. Their comments stressed the critical importance of preserving current net metering standards to provide a foundation for more distributed generation in Virginia. PEC also served as an intervenor in the case. The SCC is now reviewing the case, including expert testimony and the over 1,200 comments it received, and we are currently awaiting the decision on the next steps ahead of the SCC's May 1 deadline.

Rapidan River-Clark Mountain Rural Historic District Community Meeting



Photo by Hugh Kenny

Attendees pore over a map at a community meeting and update on the ongoing effort to create a rural historic district in portions of Culpeper, Madison and Orange counties, hosted by PEC and The Fairfield Foundation. The formal nomination will be submitted to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources for approval soon. Stay tuned for a final public hearing later this year.

UPCOMING Events

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

Guided Hike to the Piedmont Memorial Overlook

When > Friday, April 12 • 9 AM - 12 PM

Where > Meadows State Park, 11012 Edmonds Lane, Delaplane

Celebrate Earth Week and Arbor Day by joining PEC staff and Sky Meadows park rangers on a guided hike from Sky Meadows State Park to PEC's Piedmont Memorial Overlook, recently recognized as a "Treasured View" by Scenic Virginia! Learn more and register at pecva.org/events.

Earth Day Cleanup & Tree Planting

When > Wednesday, April 22 • 9:00 AM - 3:30 PM

Where > Clermont Farm, 151 Clermont Ln, Berryville

Roll up your sleeves with PEC and the Clermont Farm Foundation on Earth Day. Together, we will steward a riparian buffer previously established by Plantings for the Piedmont. Volunteers are needed to replant dead trees, pick up trash, replace bird nets and more to support native trees and shrubs along Dog Run for enhanced water quality and wildlife habitat. This is a family-friendly event, and volunteers of all ages and abilities are welcome! Learn more and register at pecva.org/events

Solar for the Ag Community: An Agrivoltaics Workshop

When > Wednesday, April 22 • 1 PM

Where > Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows, 39990 Howsers Branch, Aldie

Discover how you can integrate small-scale solar and battery backup into your farming operation with a tour of PEC's agrivoltaics project. Join fellow farmers, ag producers and landowners for this hands-on interactive workshop to learn more. Lunch will be provided. This event is free, but registration is required at pecva.org/solarag.

Bobolink Bird Walk

When > Sunday, April 26
10 AM - 12 PM

Where > Whisper Hill Farm, 7127 Maple Hill Farm, Scottsville

Welcome the return of migrating Bobolinks and watch grassland birds in their natural habitat with PEC and the Piedmont Valley Bird Club at Whisper Hill Farm. Visit pecva.org/events to register.

Birding Walk at Roundabout Meadows

When > Thursday, April 30 • 4 - 5:30 PM

Where > Old Carolina Road Trail, Parking at Mt. Zion Historic Park: 40309 Little River Turnpike, Aldie

See eastern meadowlarks, field sparrows, indigo buntings and a variety of other spring migrants on a guided birding walk through the pastures and meadows at Roundabout Meadows. Visit pecva.org/events to register.

Community Farm Plant Sale at Gilberts Corner Market

When > Saturday and Sunday • May 2 - 3 and May 9 - 10

Where > 39958 Little River Turnpike, Aldie

The Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows will be selling Certified Naturally Grown vegetable, herb and flower seedlings started in our greenhouse. Stop by the Gilberts Corner Market to purchase your plants for spring and learn about how to get involved with the Community Farm!

PEC's Annual Gathering, featuring Marion Werkheiser

When > Saturday, May 30

Where > Longwood Farm, Catlett

Join us for a fun, informative day in a beautiful setting. Featuring keynote speaker and renowned cultural heritage lawyer Marion Werkheiser, our annual gathering is a great place to see friends at the community lunch and choose your own workshops to learn more about local efforts to build a stronger, more sustainable region. Register at pecva.org/events and contact Montana Lanier Ruffner at mlanier@pecva.org with questions.

Dear Friends,

When we look back on 2026, we will recognize that it was a crucial time in the history of Virginia.

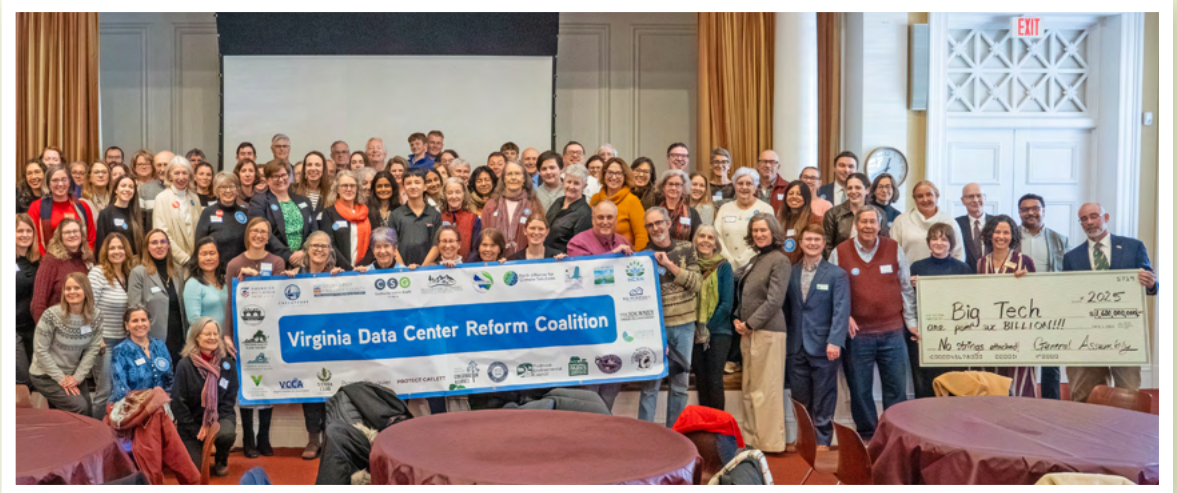
The General Assembly, faced with mounting evidence of the impacts of data centers, has taken some steps to respond to public demands to act now. And the surging cost of the sales tax exemption for data computer equipment, now at \$1.9 billion — representing nearly 6% of Virginia’s \$31 billion in state revenue — has triggered a split between the Senate and House and delayed a final budget until later in April.

More importantly, public participation has risen. People all over Virginia are calling for reform at the local and state level, noting the enormous impacts on electricity bills, threats to public health from air pollution, direct impacts of noise, the looming new transmission lines and the prospect of strains on already scarce water supplies. As people seek venues to express concerns, social media and other outlets are full of creative images and videos sharpening focus.

During the General Assembly session, thousands of people took the time to travel to Richmond, to send letters and emails, and to make phone calls to their representatives. Legislators spoke openly on the floor and to the press about hearing more about data centers than any other issue.

At public information sessions organized by Dominion and other utilities, hundreds of people are coming to learn about future plans for transmission lines, substations and new power plants. They are submitting written comments and taking the time to testify at public hearings. Landowners, homeowners and impacted organizations are taking an active role in proceedings of the State Corporation Commission and state agencies like the Department of Environmental Quality.

That craving to be heard and to participate has



Over 120 attendees joined PEC’s fourth annual Data Center Reform Lobby Day in Richmond in February, where they collectively met with more than 80 legislative offices to make their voices heard and advocate for data center reform. Photo by Hugh Kenny

also shown up in PEC’s events promoting conservation, preservation and restoration of natural and heritage resources. As much as people are increasing their civic engagement, they are also investing in the places they love and care most about.

Over the next six months, PEC and partners will sponsor hundreds of events that provide opportunities for people to take agency in a more sustainable future: one tree, one property, one community at a time. The satisfaction and hopefulness that comes from improving native habitat for plants and animals is restorative to the human spirit. As gardeners and farmers know well, nurturing new life is deeply fulfilling and a wonderful anecdote to the frustrations in other parts of our lives. Even early this year, with snow still a recent memory, we had an incredible turnout to volunteer at tree planting events, at the PEC Community Farm, and to learn more about the

Piedmont.

That same sense of satisfaction and hopefulness carries over to land conservation. In the midst of the turmoil in Virginia and the world, landowners across the region made huge commitments to a better, more sustainable future. And even more efforts are under way, more new projects being initiated.

Maybe the best ideas, plans and projects take root in the crucible of dramatic change in the economy and the world.

Sincerely,

Chris G. Miller
Chris Miller, President



Photo by Hugh Kenny



A MEMBERSHIP NEWSLETTER OF THE PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL SPRING 2026



INSIDE

Conservation stories from 2025; legislative updates from the General Assembly; meet the people protecting the Piedmont; land use highlights around the region; upcoming spring events; and more!

A rabbit in the grass. Finalist in the “Youth” category of PEC’s 2021 Photo Contest. Photo by Claire Ke

Pop Quiz

QUESTION

Virginia has five International Dark Sky Parks, and two of them are located in the Piedmont. Which of these two parks are designated as International Big Dark Sky Parks?

- a) Biscuit Run Park
- b) Sky Meadows State Park
- c) Culpeper Battlefields State Park
- d) Rappahannock County Park
- e) Shenandoah National Park



The Milky Way over Madison County. Photo by Reformed Photography

ANSWER ON PAGE 8



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