

PRESERVING WORKING FARMS & FORESTS

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WHY IT MATTERS

Working farms and forests provide varied and important benefits to all Virginians, from providing food, fiber, and wood products to supporting two of the Commonwealth's largest industries. Agriculture produces about 8.7% of the state's total economic output and accounts for 381,844 jobs, while forestry provides 108,451 jobs and generates \$23.6 billion in economic output annually. These industries support a constellation of businesses like suppliers, processors, manufacturing, retailers, and transportation and storage. Farms and forests also provide key opportunities to restore clean water, sequester carbon, mitigate flood risks, sustain wildlife and pollinators, maintain treasured open space, and unite rural communities.

Working with willing landowners to protect farms and forests from development keeps productive agricultural soils and high-quality forest land in use and helps keep rural communities strong. Compensating landowners for conserving their farms and forests allows farmers and landowners to reinvest funds into their businesses and implement long-term land and water stewardship practices. Permanently protecting farms and forests from development can also keep it affordable. In areas with high development pressure, this makes it easier for new farmers and forester owners to acquire land. Ensuring the availability and affordability of high-quality land is a key step toward addressing historic racial and economic disparities in land access.

Retaining farms and forests for the future requires consistent and full state funding for key conservation programs and supported pathways to land ownership, particularly for historically marginalized farmers and forester owners.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Between 2012 and 2022, more than 7,000 Virginia farms comprising over 992,000 acres of farmland were converted to other, non-agricultural uses in Virginia.¹ The accelerating loss of farms and forests is hurting rural communities and jobs, negatively impacting Virginia's agricultural and forest product industries, and hindering our ability to adapt to climate change.²

State programs like Virginia Land Conservation Foundation (VLCF) grants and local initiatives like Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) programs compensate willing landowners for permanently protecting their land. PDR programs help localities implement their comprehensive plans and protect

highly productive and locally important farms and forests.³ However, funding and technical assistance for local government PDR programs have historically been insufficient to meet demand statewide. This has suppressed local participation in such programs. VLCF grants have also been oversubscribed and unable to meet the demand from landowners interested in conserving their land.

Nonprofit land trusts are already key partners in protecting farms and forests, but changes to state conservation programs could help them accelerate the pace of conservation. State law currently limits experienced accredited nonprofit land trusts to the role of co-holders of conservation easements that are purchased with state funding. This creates an unnecessary burden that hinders land conservation.

When effectively managed, farms and forests can capture and clean water, sequester carbon in healthy soils, provide wildlife habitat, and mitigate the effects of a changing climate. Expanding opportunities to compensate landowners for providing these public benefits makes conservation a more viable option for all landowners, most notably new and beginning farmers, historically underserved farmers, and others seeking capital to reinvest in their land, operations, and community.

OPPORTUNITIES

In 2024, the Office of Working Lands Preservation was established when the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) Office of Farmland Preservation was transferred to the Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF). This move creates a new and potent opportunity for land conservation by combining the Office of Farmland Preservation's education, outreach, and funding with DOF's technical expertise and strong track record of land conservation into a single, unified entity for farm and forest conservation. A more holistic approach to working land conservation in Virginia may be on the horizon.

The potential of the new Office of Working Lands Preservation will go unrealized unless DOF and localities can accelerate the pace of farm and forest conservation. Now is the time for the Commonwealth to invest in the new office. With the Inflation Reduction Act and other federal action creating unprecedented federal funding for farm and forest conservation, a \$5M increase per year in the Virginia Farmland and Forestland Preservation Fund could generate an additional \$10M in federal funding to achieve conservation outcomes.

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Nonprofit land trusts are already working aggressively to leverage state funding from VLCF to tap more federal funding available through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs such as the **Agricultural Land Easement program**. Matching state and federal funding makes conservation a more financially viable option for landowners, particularly new and beginning farmers and those who have been historically underserved. Removing the VLCF requirement that experienced, accredited nonprofit land trusts must have a co-holder can reduce administrative barriers, increase attractiveness to, and accelerate the pace of farm and forest conservation.

ENDNOTES

1. USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2022 Census Volume 1, Chapter 1: State Level Data Table 1. Historical Highlights: 2022 and Earlier Census Years, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_1_State_Level/Virginia/.
2. "Agriculture and Forest Industries in Virginia," *Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service*, (2022), <https://www.coopercenter.org/research/economic-impact-agriculture-forest-industries-virginia>.
3. Bilyeu, Greg. "Forest Products Week in Virginia, October 16-20: Celebrating the People and Products of Virginia's Forest Industry," VA Department of Forestry, (October 16, 2023), https://dof.virginia.gov/wp-content/uploads/nr_2023-10-16_Forest-Products-Week-in-Virginia-October-16%E2%80%9320.pdf.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

The Office of Working Lands Preservation can help localities develop PDR ordinances, advise on best zoning practices for preserving farmland, consider equity in ranking projects that become funded, and provide training and technical assistance to enhance monitoring and enforcement with additional staff capacity and sufficient funding at \$500K per year.

The Virginia Farmland and Forest Land Preservation Fund will need robust funding to the tune of \$5M per year to achieve land conservation goals.

Removing the co-holding requirements for easements funded by the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation will increase the rate of farmland conservation in Virginia.

Wide Water State Park
Photo by James Closs

