

PROTECTING WORKING FARMS & FORESTS

Peter Hujik // Shenandoah Valley Conservancy // peter@shenandoah.org
Andy Lacatell // Chesapeake Conservancy // andylacatell@gmail.com
Mikaela Ruiz-Ramón // The Nature Conservancy // m.ruiz-ramon@tnc.org
Kevin Tate // Shenandoah Alliance // ktate@shenandoahalliance.org

WHY IT MATTERS

Working farms and forests provide food, fiber, and wood products, scenic viewsheds, and outdoor recreation opportunities that support the Commonwealth's three largest industries - agriculture, tourism, and forestry.¹ Agriculture and forestry together have a total economic impact of over \$105 billion and provide more than 490,000 jobs in the Commonwealth.² They support a constellation of businesses like suppliers, processors, manufacturers, retailers, and transportation and storage. Every job in agriculture and forestry supports 1.6 jobs elsewhere in Virginia's economy. When the employment and value-added impact of agriculture and forestry are considered together, they make up 9.3 percent of the state's total gross domestic product.³

Farms and forests can also provide critical benefits to people and nature, like clean water, carbon sequestration, mitigating flood risks by absorbing and slowing water, sustaining wildlife and pollinators, and maintaining treasured open space, history, and heritage for many rural communities.

Working with willing private landowners to protect farms and forests from development keeps productive agricultural soils and high-quality forest land in production and helps keep rural communities strong. In the near term, compensating landowners for conserving their farms and forests allows them to reinvest funds into their businesses and implement long-term land and water stewardship practices and improvements. Retaining working lands in production is also a key step toward enabling land transition to the next generation of producers and addressing historic racial, generational, and economic disparities

in land access by ensuring the continued availability and affordability of high-quality land.

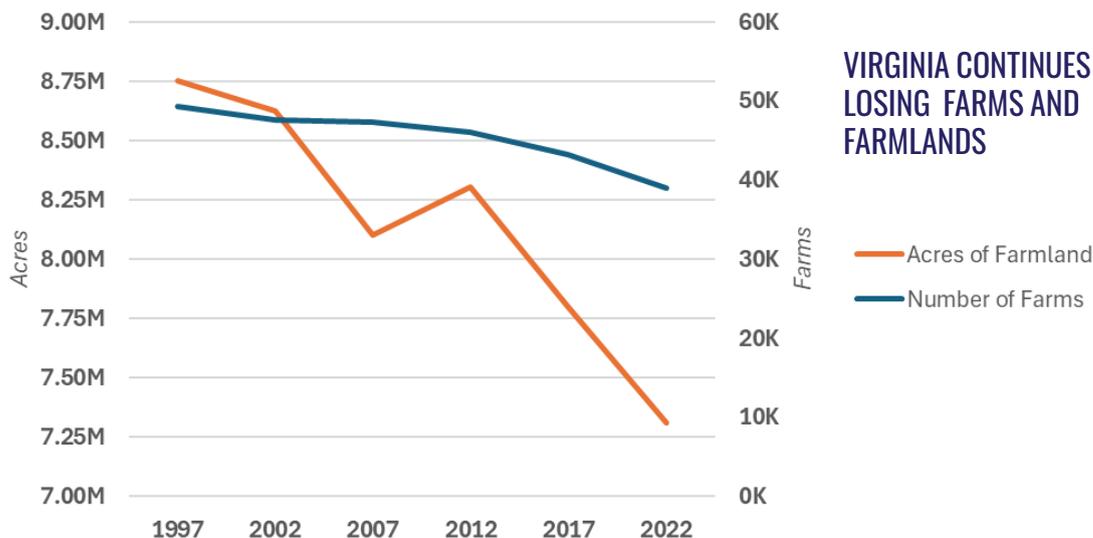
CURRENT LANDSCAPE

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.⁴ Similarly, between 2001 and 2024, Virginia's forest canopy declined by approximately 19%.⁵ The accelerating loss of farms and forests is negatively impacting Virginia's agricultural and forest product industries, which hurts rural communities and jobs, and hinders our ability to adapt to climate change.⁶

State agencies, nonprofit conservation organizations, and conservation-minded landowners are working hard together to combat this staggering loss by permanently protecting farms and forests.

State-funded programs like Virginia Land Conservation Foundation (VLCF) grants and local initiatives like Purchase of Development Rights (PDR), which help landowners place their land under a conservation easement, are successfully protecting highly productive and locally important farms and forests. The Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF) has protected 90,704 acres of working forest lands and 455 miles of watercourses throughout the state.⁷ Virginia Outdoors Foundation data shows that state, local, and nonprofit land conservation efforts have conserved a total of 651,287 acres of land with prime and significant soils.

Demand from landowners for help protecting their land has outstripped available technical assistance and funding through programs like local PDR programs, VLCF, the Land Preservation Tax Credit, and the Working Lands Fund. Progress protecting Virgin-



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ia's working lands has slowed because funding limitations introduce uncertainty about whether, when, and how much of a property can be protected. Landowners need certainty when making decisions that impact the future of their homes and livelihoods.

OPPORTUNITIES

Protecting Virginia's working lands requires full and consistent funding for key state-funded conservation programs. This provides consistency that makes conservation more financially feasible for landowners and enables nonprofit land trusts to better leverage additional funding by using state dollars as a match. For example, many nonprofit land trusts use VLCF to leverage federal funding available through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs such as the Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP-ALE) program and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

DOF's Office of Working Lands, which operates the Working Lands Fund, also needs investment in addi-

tional staff capacity to meet its full potential. It currently does not have enough staff to successfully administer Virginia's new Solar Mitigation Program, meet existing demand for technical assistance and expertise, and engage in outreach and education to accelerate conservation of threatened working lands.

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. Removing the VLCF requirement that accredited land trusts must have a co-holder can reduce administrative barriers and accelerate the pace of farmland and forest conservation to counter the current scale and pace of loss.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

VLCF and the Virginia Working Lands Fund need annual dedicated funding, at \$30 million and \$5 million, respectively, to provide consistency for landowners and enable land trusts to leverage additional funding sources.

The Office of Working Lands Preservation needs additional staff capacity and sufficient funding at \$500,000 per year to administer the new solar mitigation program and meet landowner demand for help protecting their working lands.

Removing state co-holding requirements for easements funded by VLCF will increase the rate of working farm and forest conservation in Virginia.

ENDNOTES

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4. *2022 Census Volume 1, Chapter 1: State Level Data*. (2022). Historical Highlights: 2022 and Earlier Census Years National Agricultural Statistics Service. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_1_State_Level/Virginia/
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