

PROTECTING WORKING LANDS

Rosemary Downing // Shenandoah Valley Conservancy // rosemary@shenandoah.org
Michael Kane // Piedmont Environmental Council // mkane@pecva.org
Jennifer Perkins // American Farmland Trust // jperkins@farmland.org
Kevin Tate // Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley // ktate@shenandoahalliance.org

WHY IT MATTERS

Working farms and forests are the foundation of three of the Commonwealth's largest private industries – agriculture, tourism, and forestry.¹ Together, they have a total economic impact of over \$200 billion and generate more than 1,000,000 jobs in the Commonwealth.² They support a constellation of businesses like suppliers, processors, manufacturers, retailers, transportation, and storage while providing the scenic views from public lands and the backdrop of Virginia tourism and critical buffers for key national defense infrastructure on the coastal plain.³ Every job in agriculture and forestry supports 1.6 jobs elsewhere in Virginia's economy⁴ and more than 114 million people visited the Commonwealth in 2024.⁵ When the employment and value-added impact of agriculture, tourism, and forestry are considered together, they make up 12.8% percent of the state's total gross domestic product.⁶

When managed with sustainable and regenerative practices, farms and forests also provide critical benefits to people and nature, like clean water, carbon sequestration, flood mitigation, 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 prime agricultural soils and high-quality forest land in production and rural communities strong. Conserving working lands provides direct financial benefits to landowners, including compensation and reduced property tax burdens, which can be reinvested into their businesses, used to implement long-term soil, water, and habitat stewardship and improvements, and address historic racial, generational and economic disparities in land access and heirs' property by preserving generational wealth and supporting the successful transfer of land to the next generation.

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.⁷ Similarly, between 2001 and 2024, Virginia's forest canopy declined by approximately 19%.⁸ The accelerating loss of farms and forests is negatively impacting Virginia's agricultural and forest product industries, which hurts rural communities and employment, and hinders our ability to adapt to climate change.⁹ Additionally, we are in the midst of a generational shift in land ownership, with five times as many farmers over the age of 65 as under 35 in the Commonwealth.¹⁰ State

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

State-funded programs, like **Virginia Land Conservation Foundation (VLCF)** grants¹¹ local land protection initiatives, like **Purchase of Development Rights (PDR)**, and **conservation easements**, are successfully protecting highly productive and locally important farms and forests¹² and streamlining transition to the next generation. The **Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF)** has protected 91,205 acres of working forest through conservation easements across Virginia.¹³ Virginia Outdoors Foundation data shows that state, local, and nonprofit land conservation efforts have conserved 651,287 acres of prime and significant soils.¹⁴

Demand from landowners for help protecting their land has outstripped available technical assistance and funding through local PDR programs, VLCF, the **Land Preservation Tax Credit**, and the **Farmland and Forestland Preservation Fund**. Limited funding has slowed progress protecting Virginia's working lands, creating 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

The 2025 **Chesapeake Bay Agreement** sets a target of 2 million additional acres protected in the watershed.¹⁵ Virginia already has the private and public framework in place to be a leader in this regional effort. To capitalize on that will require consistent commitment from legislators and agencies to leverage funding, support localities, and maximize conservation outcomes.

Protecting Virginia's working lands requires robust and reliable funding for key state-funded conservation programs. Consistent funding provides the certainty and financial feasibility that is essential for landowners to make long term decisions about the future of their land. It also 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)** and defense oriented programs like the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration and Sentinel Landscapes Partnership programs.

PROTECTING WORKING LANDS

Rosemary Downing // Shenandoah Valley Conservancy // rosemary@shenandoah.org
Michael Kane // Piedmont Environmental Council // mkane@pecva.org
Jennifer Perkins // American Farmland Trust // jperkins@farmland.org
Kevin Tate // Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley // ktate@shenandoahalliance.org

DOF's Office of Working Lands Preservation, which operates the Working Lands Fund, also needs investment in additional 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.

ENDNOTES

1. *State of the Forest Annual Report on Virginia's Forests - RD101*. (2024). Virginia Department of Forestry. <https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2024/RD101>
2. *U.S. Food & Ag Industries: Economic Impact in Virginia*. (2026). Feeding the Economy. <https://goodstone-test.guerrillaeconomics.net/reports/3c1ae834-5ddf-4a46-86cd-42f9d838762e>
3. Virginia Security Corridor. (n.d.). Virginia Department of Forestry. <https://dof.virginia.gov/land-water-protection/farm-and-forestland-conservation/virginia-security-corridor/>
4. *Agriculture Facts and Figures*. (2026). Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. <https://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/markets-and-finance-agriculture-facts-and-figures.shtml>
5. *Economic impact of visitors to Virginia - 2024* (2025). Tourism Economics. https://vatc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/TE_-_Economic_Impact_of_Visitors_to_Virginia-2024-_FINAL1.pdf
6. Rephann, T.. (2022, October 1). *The Economic Impact of Agriculture and Forest Industries in Virginia*. Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service. <https://www.coopercenter.org/research/economic-impact-agriculture-forest-industries-virginia>
7. Mahon, E. (2025). Conservation easements as tools for heirs' property owners. *Sea Grant Law & Policy Journal*, 14(1), 125–[End Page]. <https://nsglc.olemiss.edu/sglpj/vol14no1/sglpj14.1-mahon.pdf>

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Funding the Farmland and Forestland Preservation Fund at \$5 million per year would accelerate the long-term protection of farm and forest land critical to Virginia's economy.

Invest in farm succession initiatives that leverage existing non-governmental efforts to facilitate passing farmland to the next generation and help stem the loss of Virginia's farmland.

Ensure the Office of Working Lands Preservation has adequate staffing to successfully implement its programs.

8. *2022 Census Volume 1, Chapter 1: State Level Data. Historical Highlights: 2022 and Earlier Census Years National Agricultural Statistics Service*. (2022). United States Department of Agriculture. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_1_State_Level/Virginia/
9. *Virginia, United States: Forest Change*. (2020). Global Forest Watch. <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/USA/47/?category=forest-change&location=WYJb3VudHJ5IiwVNBliwiNDciXQ%3D%3D>
10. *Natural and Working Lands and Climate Action: A State Guide to Enhance the Sector's Contribution to State and National Climate Goals*. (2022). United States Climate Alliance. <https://usclimatealliance.org/guide/nwl-state-guide-nov-2022/>
11. *2022 census of agriculture: Virginia state profile*. (2024). U.S. Department of Agriculture. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Virginia/cp99051.pdf
12. *VLCF FY27 grant manual*. (2026). Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/land-conservation/vlcf>
13. *VLCF Funded Projects*. (2026). Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/land-conservation/vlcf-grant-list?id=2023-11-21-10-32-35-520628-pi5>
14. *State of the Forest Annual Report*. (2025). Virginia Department of Forestry. <https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2026/RD141/PDF>
15. *Department of Conservation and Recreation's Virginia Conservation Lands Database*. (2025, August 25). Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/clinfo>

Foggy morning in Albemarle County, VA
Photo by Peter Forister

