



VALLEY CONSERVATION COUNCIL

# VISION

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PROMOTING LAND USE THAT SUSTAINS THE FARMS, FORESTS, OPEN SPACES, AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY REGION



*The Jackson River winds through a conserved property west of Warm Springs. Bath County led the state in conserved acres in 2011.*

## Region Has Four of the Top Five Conservation Counties for 2011

Neighboring Bath and Rockbridge counties led the state for the second year in a row in acres conserved by private landowners working with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation. In 2011, four of the top five counties in Virginia were in VCC's region.

Counties in the Upper James River area led the way, with Bath, Rockbridge, Augusta and Highland putting forward great numbers.

Landowners in Virginia's farming powerhouse, Rockingham County, are starting to show more interest. Rockingham's conserved acreage was boosted by 40% in 2011, adding 1,066 new acres across seven properties to end up 12th in the state for the year.

There are private lands conserved with easements held by other organizations and agencies in the region. For instance, the Virginia Department of Forestry has an easement on over 1,000 acres in Rockingham not included in these totals; however, VOF holds the vast majority of easements and so its statistics provide a helpful gauge for comparison.

### Virginia Outdoors Foundation 2011 Conservation Easements in Area Served by VCC

County	2011 Easements	2011 Acres	Cumulative Acres
Alleghany			6,469
Augusta	11	1,718	17,777
Bath	8	2,567	23,956
Botetourt			14,819
Frederick			4,565
Highland	7	1,566	11,284
Page	1	61	1,793
Rockbridge	10	2,260	35,200
Rockingham	7	1,066	3,721
Shenandoah			3,636
Staunton (City)			3
Warren	1	89	6,345
Winchester			115
VCC Region	45	9,327	129,683

*Source: Virginia Outdoors Foundation (acres rounded)*

# VOF Adds Options for Working Lands

## New Easement Template Geared to More Intensive Agricultural Operations

One of the many challenges farmers and foresters face today is uncertainty. Agriculture is changing fast, with great potential for technologies and markets that are only just emerging, such as waste to energy production or agritourism. Farmers want to be sure they will be allowed to undertake a range of commercial activities that are still based in the land, but may be very different from traditional farming.

Traditional conservation easements often focused on the scenic conservation values of a property. Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF) has worked hard over the years to accommodate more intensive farms that have well-sited poultry houses or large dairies, but they have also missed some great properties that simply could not fit into their standard easement's restrictions.

Intensive agriculture is an issue of particular concern in the top farming counties—Rockingham, Augusta, Page and Shenandoah. Several years ago VCC took a hard look at the successful agricultural easement programs in Pennsylvania and shared that information in the Valley through visits by colleagues from the Lancaster Farmland Trust.

The Office of Farmland Preservation in the Virginia Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services also saw that the traditional conservation easement documents may not have enough flexibility to allow for the changing face of agricultural enterprises and the larger scale structures that new technologies and approaches may require.

Commissioner of Agriculture, Matt Lohr, himself a farmer in Rockingham County, assembled a working

group of people representing easement holding agencies, conservation attorneys, VCC, Virginia Farm Bureau, and Virginia Agribusiness Council to tackle this issue. After over a year's effort, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation drafted and adopted a new alternative easement template for "Intensive Agriculture" situations last fall.

The new easement variant sets off a "farmstead envelope" of several acres where the landowner has more freedom to build the buildings and housing they may need and to host the types of agricultural businesses that local zoning will allow. There is a trade-off. Landowners will face much tighter restrictions on division of the land.

These easements may work best for larger farms that have or hope to have more intensive commercial operations; however they do still have strong limitations. For instance, all properties will still be limited by a cap on "impervious surfaces" (essentially rooftops) that all VOF easements impose to help protect water quality by limiting runoff. This cap is based on a percentage of the total acreage of the property which means that smaller acreage properties would still be quite limited in the number of large structures they might be able to have, even within the relative freedom of the farmstead envelope.

Conservation easements are always crafted to uniquely protect the values of each parcel of land. This new template offers another "tool in the toolbox" for consideration by some landowners. VCC staff members are happy to discuss the many options with landowners and direct them to the appropriate agency or organization that best suits the needs of their land.

### Department of Forestry Seeks Conservation Easements

Owners of working forestland may want to consider an easement with the Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOT). Their program is geared for parcels of 50 acres or more with at least 75% in forest. As VDOT reports, Virginia has lost an average of 16,000 acres of forestland annually over the last ten years, much of it to development. As houses creep into the forests and parcels get smaller, it becomes increasingly challenging to perform sustainable forest management.

Forest landowners may contact VCC for an initial discussion about their land and we will gladly connect them with a VDOT easement specialist.



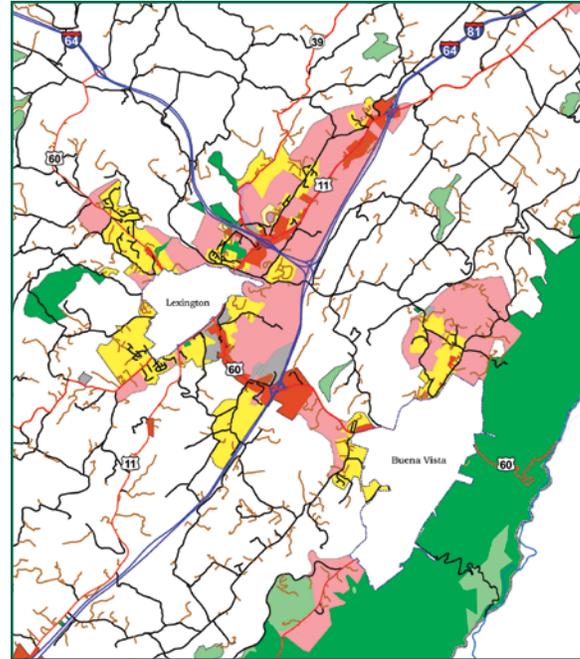
*A new conservation easement designed for "intensive agriculture" operations may help some landowners better accommodate the buildings and uses necessary to keep up with changes in farming.*

# Roundtable Brings Out Successes, Challenges

On November 30, VCC held a regional Planners Roundtable in Woodstock on “Moving Away from a Sprawl Development Pattern.” Planners from Valley towns, cities, and counties shared their best successes and greatest challenges. Their presentations revealed a diverse sampling of exemplary projects, from zoning code rewrites to master planning for a hospital district. The challenges, on the other hand, often were common across all the localities. Lack of political will and public perception of density ranked high.

The group then talked about what would be the most important changes that would result in better development design or better resource protection or, ideally, both. Topping the list was education. Also noted were making implementation easier for developers, setting minimum standards for compact design, and taking a proactive approach to conservation.

The roundtable benefitted greatly from the help of planning consultant Milt Herd, who has worked on these very issues in a number of communities in the Valley. VCC Planner Sara Hollberg summed up, “Good conservation and good development go hand in hand, but the challenges are daunting. It will take concrete steps like those coming out of this discussion.”



*Zoning to Reduce Sprawl: Rockbridge County's 2010 zoning code rewrite came after a thorough public engagement process. Development potential is greater in Agricultural Transition zones (pink) around communities but decreases along a sliding scale in the other agricultural zones (light green and white).*

## Appalachian Trail Communities Designated

In December, the tiny town of Troutville in Botetourt County celebrated its designation as an Appalachian Trail Community by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. Mayor Bill Rader thanked “all those who are passionate about the Appalachian Trail and the revitalization efforts of the Town to transform itself into a vibrant traditional town with premier outdoor recreation opportunities.” The Appalachian

Trail Community program recognizes communities that promote and protect the Appalachian Trail and helps them make the most of the “A.T.” as a resource and asset, including for tourism. Troutville’s recent citizen-led strategic planning effort emphatically called for pursuing a formal partnership with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

Last year, nine Virginia communities were approved for designation as A.T. Communities. Six are in the VCC region: Troutville, Glasgow, Buena Vista, Waynesboro, Harrisonburg, and Front Royal.

Harrisonburg celebrated its designation on June 10, 2011. Upcoming celebrations will be held on April 19 for Buena Vista and Glasgow and on April 21 for Front Royal.



*Pictured at the Troutville ceremony are members of the 'Trail DAWGZ' Appalachian Trail Student Advisory Council from Central Academy Middle School. (Courtesy of L. Miller, Together for Troutville)*

# Speakers Talk on Augusta History, Agriculture

The Augusta Community Partnership (ACP) continued its speaker series on conservation and development topics, with well-attended talks in November and January. VCC is organizing the series in coordination with the Augusta County Farm Bureau and the Headwaters Soil and Water Conservation District. Many thanks to Community Foundation of the Central Blue Ridge and U.S. Forest Service Urban and Community Forestry program for supporting this series.

## Koons Describes Engrained Link between Valley Farming and Industry

On November 29, VMI history professor Ken Koons outlined how Augusta County, throughout its historic settlement, has had a balance of agriculture and manufacture based on its natural resources. In particular, the wheat agriculture spawned associated enterprises like milling and barrel, cart, and harness making shops, giving rise to towns. This thriving interdependence of village and countryside was more common in the “town rich” Valley than east of the Blue Ridge where the tobacco economy did not rely as much on processing and small businesses.

More than 100 people attended the talk, which was co-sponsored by the Augusta County Historical Society.

*Historian Ken Koons (left) talks with sheep farmer Leo Tammi after the presentation. (Courtesy of Midge Price)*



## Greatest Challenge for Farming: Getting to the Next Generation

Steve Saufley, a Port Republic farmer and board member of the Virginia Farm Bureau, delivered an engaging and thought-provoking talk on the state of farming in the January session. While agriculture and forestry remain blockbuster economic drivers, the economics are increasingly tough for farmers. He ticked off the changes occurring in his lifetime to illustrate. In 1944 his father was able to buy the farm over a six-year period and it was common to be able to finance a silo in one year.

Now the cost of land is so high that few young people can afford to come into the profession and farm families have a difficult time getting the farm to the next generation. Finding replacement farmers is a critical issue. In many farm families the children aren't interested. In others, the one(s) interested would have to buy out the siblings, which is not only exceedingly expensive but also fraught with emotional and legal hurdles. “What’s the plan?” asked Saufley. Just preserving land does not mean agriculture is being preserved. He sees that incentives are needed to keep farmers on the land.

The talk, co-sponsored by the Augusta County Farm Bureau, drew more than 60 people. Many stayed long after talking and enjoying delicious fare provided by the ACFB Women’s Committee.



*Augusta County Farm Bureau President Carl Arey, VCC planner Sara Hollberg, and speaker Steve Saufley relax after the talk. (Courtesy of Midge Price)*

### Upcoming Sessions for “This Place Augusta”

**Feb. 29** - Planning Augusta (County officials)

**Mar. 27** - Conserve as You Grow Augusta (Sara Hollberg)

**Apr. 30** - Future Augusta – Group/Panel Discussion

# VCC Assisting with Fencing and Farm to Table Grants

In June of 2011 VCC took on a small contract to assist our partner organization, the Shenandoah Resource Conservation and Development Council, with administration of several larger grants they had secured and other basic operations. The RC&D, which VCC helped found and govern, is a highly successful nonprofit organization that has brought millions of dollars to the Valley for a wide range of projects.

Unfortunately, the group suddenly lost its federally supported office and staffing assistance in budget cuts in April 2011. VCC was asked by the RC&D Council to step in and to help out with administrative support.

The bulk of this work has involved two innovative projects that mesh very well with VCC's priorities. Sustaining farms and forests means helping farmers stay on the land, and to do that these days they often need to improve farm management with water quality in mind while also boosting their financial bottom line.

The first project, deemed "Flex Fence" involves privately funded fencing options to keep livestock out of streams and rivers. Technical aspects of this effort are handled primarily by local Soil and Water Conservation Districts and are supported by the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network and the Virginia Environmental Endowment. The project offers farmers options to adaptively design their fencing systems to best match their land and operations. The funding is used as a "last dollar" option to fill in gaps that other federal and state programs may not be able to accommodate.

The second large project is a three-year, \$700,000 National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant called "Creating a Culture of Conservation from Farm to Table." In this project the RC&D is working with Virginia Cooperative Extension, Water Stewardship, Inc. and other partners to foster a stronger local foods economy that also encourages improved conservation practices on the farm. The grant supports the Buy Fresh, Buy Local efforts in the Valley and is working to help local food production get up to scale to serve local colleges, schools and other institutional buyers.



*This farm near Keezletown in Rockingham County has utilized a range of tools including adaptive stream fencing to improve pasture management and water quality. Cattle gather around a gravity-fed watering system. A planted tree buffer helps stabilize the hillside in the background.*

## Federal Easement Incentives Have Strong Bipartisan Support

With perhaps the strongest bipartisan support of any bills in recent history, the move to make the expanded federal incentives for conservation easement donations permanent is still awaiting congressional action in the House. Representatives from the VCC region are firmly behind the effort, joining over 300 House members as co-sponsors of the Conservation Easement Incentive Act (H.R. 1964).

"We are thrilled that majorities of Republicans and Democrats can agree on supporting the work of local land trusts that is so important to their communities," said Land Trust Alliance President Rand Wentworth.

Incentives originally put in place under President Bush expired at the end of 2011. The current hope is that those rules will be reinstated and perhaps made permanent. The benefits would allow landowners with qualified easement donations up to 15 years to carry forward an easement deduction and would allow landowners to work down their easement deduction with the equivalent of 50% of the adjusted gross income each year or 100% for qualifying working farmers and ranchers. Since the incentives were rolled back, current easement donors have 5 years to carryover their deductions and can only deduct the equivalent of 30% AGI in any year.

As in the past, if this legislation is passed, the expanded rules are very likely to be made retroactive for donations made earlier in the year.



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## Want to Support Conservation?

As you can see from reading this newsletter, Valley Conservation Council enjoyed an active closing to a very active 2011. VCC is here to support what we all love about this Valley: family farms; safe drinking water; good soils growing good food; forests where people can hunt, fish and grow timber; strong, vibrant towns and cities; unparalleled history and heritage; and the rural character that defines the region. There is so much more to accomplish.

You can assist VCC in meeting our 2012 (and beyond) goals in a number of ways:

### **Consider conservation**

- Call to set up a personal meeting to discuss your conservation goals.

### **Introduce VCC to others**

- Share our newsletter with others (we'll send you extra copies).
- Send a link to VCC's website and/or Facebook page to your online friends.
- Suggest VCC speakers for your community group's next meeting.

### **Provide financial support**

- Using the enclosed envelope
- Securely on-line from our website
- By remembering VCC in your estate planning.



*Even the Valley's smaller residents are happy for open space to play in the recent snow.*