



Grants allow for conservation of Eastern Shore islands, farm

By Scott Harper, The Virginian-Pilot

© June 9, 2005

In a sign of new attention to land preservation in Virginia, state officials awarded \$3 million in grants Wednesday that will allow The Nature Conservancy to buy two Eastern Shore islands on the Chesapeake Bay and protect 222 acres of farmland in Northampton County.

The grants announced by the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation, a state board, stem from a decision by state lawmakers earlier this year to set aside \$10 million this year for buying or preserving special lands before they can be developed.

It was the largest appropriation for protecting natural areas, old battlefields, farms, forests and historic properties in years, and it came after conservationists bemoaned how Virginia was lagging behind neighboring states in acquiring public lands.

“These grants are a great step forward for the state,” said Nikki Rovner, an administrator with The Nature Conservancy in Virginia, an environmental group.

The state foundation awarded 12 grants Wednesday. Among them: \$362,000 to buy 19 acres of Civil War battlefield in Culpeper County scheduled for residential development; \$258,000 to place protections on an 1,800-acre farm in Essex County owned by the same family since the 1600s ; and \$224,130 to preserve 225 acres of old-growth forest in Giles County threatened by logging interests.

Locally, the state awarded two grants to The Nature Conservancy to help preserve land on the Eastern Shore.

The conservation group will combine \$500,000 from the state with other money to purchase Marks Island and Jacks Island, two marshy fingers that jut into the Chesapeake Bay in Accomack County. Together, the islands extend over 2,200 acres of salt marsh, maritime forest, sandy beaches and migratory bird habitat.

Scientifically, they are considered “globally significant sites,” said Gary Waugh, spokesman for the state Department of Conservation and Recreation.

The state also gave The Nature Conservancy \$400,000 to purchase a no-development easement on 222 acres of active farmland known as the Black Farms property, off U.S. 13 at the headwaters of Old Plantation Creek near Cape Charles.

At the southern tip of Northampton County, near the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, land prices are skyrocketing as developers buy up more farmland to convert into homes, condos and shopping centers. The Black Farms site is considered prime real estate, given its

proximity to U.S. 13, the main road on the Eastern Shore; its size; and its location.

By preserving the farm, “the community’s desire to retain its rural character is very much the same as our goal of wanting to protect valuable habitat for migratory birds along the Chesapeake Bay,” Rovner said .

Virginia does not have a permanent fund for sensitive-lands acquisition, as other states do, instead relying on lawmakers each year to set aside money.

The Virginia Land Conservation Foundation was created in 1999, and the General Assembly funded it with \$1.75 million that year. The next year, lawmakers appropriated \$6.2 million. But they did not earmark any more until 2004, according to officials.

With the \$10 million this year, the foundation plans to award another round of grants in December, officials said.

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