

Other Voices: Protecting forestland helps protect water quality

By Dennis H. Treacy

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From now through June, schools of the once-plentiful, now-struggling fish species American shad will migrate from the Atlantic Ocean back to their spawning grounds. Driven by instinct, these fish will navigate up North Carolina's Chowan River, swimming in the shadows of ancient tupelo gum and cypress trees to end their life journeys in the Blackwater, Meherrin and Nottoway rivers of Virginia.

Serving as breeding grounds for shad and other migratory fish, these rivers also provide the lifeblood of southeastern Virginia's 4,000-square-mile "Pine Belt" - an area dominated by loblolly pine forests stretching from western Isle of Wight County to Brunswick County. The Pine Belt is where the shad and the woods meet - literally, in the case of Virginia's famous Shad Planking, a political event named for the process of slow-smoking the oily fish on a slab of wood.

A few miles away lie 4,900 acres of Sussex County pine forest that The Nature Conservancy recently announced it had secured as part of a historic land deal with International Paper. The Conservancy hopes to work with the state to turn the property, known as Big Woods, into Southside Virginia's first state forest.

Conservation-minded private investors will acquire another 15,930 acres in partnership with the Conservancy. If the investors decide to sell, the Conservancy will get first crack at these several large tracts along the Blackwater, Meherrin and Nottoway, some of the finest aquatic habitat on the East Coast.

Because forests help to filter sediment and harmful pollutants that threaten the health of our waterways, a growing number of local and state governments are taking action to save large, intact areas of forestland that protect their drinking water. In North Carolina, for example, Mecklenburg County has spent more than \$29 million to buy forests that protect residents' drinking water. And last year San Antonio, Texas, passed a sales-tax increase to buy land to protect its water supply.

Virginia's forests are changing rapidly. Each day in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, 100 acres of forests are developed. In the last few weeks, International Paper announced it would sell more than 5 million acres of its forests to two separate private investor groups. International Paper isn't alone. Across the country, large timberland holdings are being subdivided and sold, presenting risks to wildlife, water quality and rural economies.

Plenty of warning signs reveal how fast our rural lands are disappearing. Yet Virginia has barely begun to provide sufficient and reliable funding for land conservation. The state did take a positive step last year, allocating roughly \$12.5 million to the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation. The General Assembly should be commended for this action. However, this was the first significant contribution since the foundation was created in 1999. We must continue to do more to protect our lands and waters.

While Virginia legislators continue to negotiate the state budget, funding needs for land conservation continue to be largely unmet. There's still time to act, but the longer we wait, the cost of land rises and opportunities for conserving our rural lands grow more scarce. Private conservation groups, local communities and businesses can't do it alone. The state needs to do its share.

Land conservation represents an essential function of good government. In fact, in Virginia our state constitution declares that the protection of our natural resources is a core function of state government. As Theodore Roosevelt said, "I recognize the right and duty of this generation to develop and use our natural resources, but I do not recognize the right to waste them, or to rob by wasteful use, the generations that come after us."

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