



Virginia's rural landscape needs a healthy dose of public funding

by Charles G. McDaniel

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As an outdoorsman, I've been fortunate to hunt in some of the country's most beautiful places, such as the quail plantations in Georgia and South Carolina. But as the famous movie line says, "There's no place like home." Given a choice, I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be than right here on my land in King and Queen County, watching my dogs work a field in search of quail.

From stalking game birds in frosty open fields to casting trout flies in swift mountain streams, Virginians have always enjoyed the bounty of a diverse and beautiful landscape. But today the lands and waters we depend upon for cherished Virginia traditions are disappearing at an unprecedented rate. Unless we change the landscape of public funding for conservation, Virginia's landscape will continue to change for the worse.

The footprint of development across Virginia will double in the next 25 years, so maintaining our quality of life will require us to balance this growth by establishing more protected lands. In the past few weeks, forestland ownership changed dramatically in the state with International Paper's announcement that it is selling the majority of its timberland--more than 5 million acres throughout the U.S.--to two private investor groups.

Fortunately, International Paper also agreed to sell nearly 21,000 acres in southeastern Virginia to The Nature Conservancy. The conservancy is discussing transferring a 4,900-acre portion of the property, called the Big Woods, to the state for the creation of a new state forest in Sussex County. This property is adjacent to The Nature Conservancy's Piney Grove Preserve, where the group is working to increase the rare red-cockaded woodpecker population through sound land management practices, which also benefit quail habitat.

The Nature Conservancy is a strong supporter of developing public places for outdoors enthusiasts to hunt and fish. The group assisted the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, for which I served as a past chairman of the board, to acquire nearly 4,000 acres of public hunting grounds and recreational areas from International Paper in Chesapeake.

Though the scale of the conservancy's recent 20,000-acre deal with International Paper is impressive, the fact remains that Virginia loses roughly 20,000 acres of forestland each year. What do these numbers mean for Virginia's outdoor sports enthusiasts?

Woods to hunt in will continue to disappear or shrink, and grow ever more crowded and dangerous. And with more than half of Virginia's rivers and streams already impaired,

anglers can expect dwindling catches and will continue to see posted public health notices warning them of health risks. Moreover, the Chesapeake Bay, historically our greatest fishery, continues to decline.

Now is the time to invest in conservation. Protecting Virginia's lands and waters only grows more expensive and difficult as our wildlife habitat grows scarcer. Though Virginia's Constitution identifies natural resource protection as a core function of state government, Virginia consistently ranks near the bottom among states in funding for land conservation. The commonwealth cannot continue to rely on outdoors enthusiasts and private conservation organizations alone to protect natural resources for the lasting benefit of everyone in the state. Virginia simply must do more.

And it did in 2005, when it allocated \$12.5 million in new state funds to protect natural and historic areas, farmland, and forests throughout the commonwealth through the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation. Still, this was the first significant contribution to the foundation since its creation in 1999.

But now both chambers in the General Assembly have reached an impasse over how best to fund transportation over the long term in the state budget. Meanwhile, funding for land conservation is at risk of being forgotten amid this debate. To leave land conservation needs in Virginia underfunded--or worse, unfunded--would be to yield the future of our natural and rural lands to outside forces.

With an annual investment by the state of \$50 million, Virginia would have the means to preserve critical wildlife habitat, such as the proposed Sussex County state forest at Big Woods, when opportunities arise with willing landowners. These state lands become places for Virginians of all ages to enjoy, providing opportunities to hunt, fish, boat, or just observe and photograph wildlife.

As long as there has been a Virginia, its people have sustained and enriched their lives by learning to fish, hunt, and otherwise enjoy our great outdoors. I sincerely hope this generation of Virginians will be the one to secure a legacy of wild places so that our time-honored traditions are passed down for many generations to come.

CHARLES G. MCDANIEL, a past chairman of the board of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, is chairman of the Hilldrup Cos. in Stafford.