

The Department of Forestry's Tomorrow Woods Incentive Program

By: Rob Suydam, Virginia Department of Forestry

In 2011, the Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOP) began to offer Virginia forest landowners a unique funding program called Tomorrow Woods to assist them in the development of conservation easements on their land. Since that time, the program has supported the development of 12 conservation easements that protect 3,300 acres of land, more than 3,000 of which are forested. In an effort to gain even more success, VDOP has created new incentives in the Tomorrow Woods program to expand the program's impact.

The Tomorrow Woods program, supported by Dominion Virginia Power, is available to landowners interested in developing conservation easements on their forestland. The program is available to forest landowners in the counties of Dinwiddie, Gloucester, Isle of Wight, Prince George, Southampton, Surry and Sussex, and the City of Suffolk. Landowners in these areas may be eligible for up to a \$20,000 payment based on property attributes such as acreage, forest management, and forest cover, as well as easement enhancements selected by the landowner.

Many Virginia forest landowners face the issue of how they will pass their land down to the next generation. Private owners hold 13 million acres of Virginia's forestland, seven million of which is owned by landowners age 55 or older. With the decisions made today, these landowners will either protect our farms and forests or convert them to other uses. For some families, protection from development provided by a conservation easement is the answer.

Judi Guy, who with her father, followed through with her mother's dream of protecting the family's 306 acres, said, "My mother wanted the land to go into conservation easement because of the feature of perpetuity for the land being used for sustainable forestry management using Best Management Practices." When the conservation easement was recorded, the timing was special for Judi and her Dad. "The irony is it was two years ago we lost Mom. The timing could not have been more meaningful to me."

Private land managers are not the only ones choosing conservation easements; professional land managers are as well. Forest Consultant Lee Bethea developed two conservation easements protecting more than 600 acres of land and nearly a mile of the Nottaway River. "It gives me a lot of pleasure knowing that with the VDOP I've done something to protect the land and timber, forest management practices, water quality, wildlife, scenic beauty and recreation for future generations. An easement is the only way that I could be assured that the land will look the same 100 years from now," said Bethea.

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between the landowner and a government agency or land trust that limits future development of the land to protect its conservation values. Conservation easements limit the division and development of the property to protect values such as forestry, agriculture, open space and wildlife habitat. The organization holding the easement is responsible for enforcing the easement's terms,

which are perpetual, applying to all future landowners. Landowners continue to own, use and control their land, and are able to sell it or pass it on to heirs.

Forestland conservation is an integral part of VDOF's mission to protect and develop healthy, sustainable forest resources for Virginians, and to work with landowners to protect large blocks of working forests by keeping them intact and unfragmented through the development of conservation easements. For more information on the Tomorrow Woods program and land conservation, contact Rob Suydam.

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Conservation easements held by the Virginia Department of Forestry promote working forests on private lands. Photo by: Rob Suydam, VDOF.