

PRIVATE LANDS PARTNERS DAY



WILLIAMSBURG, VA - OCTOBER 7-9, 2025



Partnerscapes held the 17th annual Private Lands Partners Day (PLPD) in Williamsburg, Virginia, on October 7-9, 2025. We had a much smaller number of attendees this year, given there was a government shutdown in effect, making it impossible for our federal partners to participate. We were deeply sorry that they were unable to

attend, as they are key to our partnerships and success. We had 60 participants at PLPD, with half of the attendees being private landowners. Although we had a small group, it was an incredible event, with an excellent field trip and outstanding speakers, panelists, and attendees.



Opening Reception

PLPD kicked off with a wonderful evening reception at Williamsburg Lodge. Bill Owen, landowner and local host, and Jim Stone, Partnerscapes Board Chair, welcomed everyone to PLPD. The highlight of the evening was a special guest – none other than Thomas Jefferson!

Field Tour

The field tour was both extremely diverse and educational, having three unique stops that highlighted various aspects of the breadth of partnerships with private landowners in southeastern Virginia. We learned about a wide variety of agricultural practices, and conservation projects and programs covering areas of York, Surry, Sussex, and Charles City Counties. The field tour began with a ferry ride across the James River.



Cedar Point Farms

Brent Lowe and his two sons, Clay and Jameson, farm 1,500 acres for peanuts, cotton, soybeans, corn, wheat, rye, and oats. Their farm is considered a demonstration farm, where they lead field tours and mentor other producers on adopting new innovative practices on their own operations. **Elizabeth Cooper**, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and Brent Lowe shared information about peanut farming in Virginia and how the Lowe family is managing peanut cropping systems for soil health. Clay Lowe shared a presentation on how the farm is using cover crops to increase soil organic matter, nitrogen fixation, and mycorrhizal fungi growth.



Brent Lowe, Cedar Point Farms and Elizabeth Cooper, Virginia Cooperative Extension



Piney Grove Preserve (driving tour)

Piney Grove is a 3,200-acre preserve owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy (TNC). It harbors one of Virginia's last breeding populations of red-cockaded woodpeckers, the northernmost population in the United States.

Raccoon Creek Pinelands

Thank you to Raccoon Creek Pinelands for hosting a wonderful lunch in the pavilion. The pavilion, built out of old-growth longleaf pine, is used for education and outreach programs about longleaf pine.

Brian Van Eerden, Virginia Pinelands Program Director for TNC, shared that the longleaf pine ecosystem is one of the most biologically diverse forest ecosystems in North America. The range of longleaf pine historically spanned 90 million acres, with only five million acres of longleaf pine remaining today. Longleaf pine is a very valuable habitat for suites of wildlife species, including many endemics.

Bill Owen, landowner, has worked with many partners to plant over 1,300 acres of longleaf pine on his property, making it the largest longleaf pine acreage in the northern range of the ecosystem.

Rebecca Wilson, Virginia Department of Conservation & Recreation Longleaf Specialist, described the importance of prescribed burning, a widely used management tool for promoting resilience and sustainability in longleaf pine ecosystems. The prescribed burns are accomplished through an interagency partnership, which works extremely well.

Marc Puckett, retired Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (VDWR) Private Lands Program Manager, shared the importance of private lands to landscape-level species conservation, using bobwhite quail as an example. He highlighted the critical role that private landowners play in accomplishing landscape-level conservation.



Brian Van Eerden, Virginia Pinelands Program Director for TNC



Bill Owen, Virginia landowner



Rebecca Wilson, Longleaf Specialist, Virginia Department of Conservation & Recreation



Marc Puckett, retired Private Lands Program Manager, Virginia Dept. of Wildlife Resources,



Historic Shirley

Historic Shirley is the oldest active plantation in Virginia and is the oldest family-owned business in North America, dating to 1614 and with operations starting in 1638. Historic Shirley is still an active working farm, with the 11th and 12th generation Carter family still living on the plantation.

Agriculture

Charles Carter, 11th generation landowner at Historic Shirley, shared historic and current information about the agricultural aspects of the plantation. He shared specific information about the pecan industry. Other crops they continue to grow on the plantation include soybeans, cotton, and wheat.



House Tour

The construction of the house was completed in 1738 and has been occupied by the Hill Carter family for twelve generations since then. The upper floors are occupied by the Hill Carter family while the bottom floor is open for tours. Lauren Carter shared her firsthand experiences of living on the historic plantation and raising their two children there.



River Stewardship and Conservation/ Landowner Collaboration

Jim Wallace and **Robert Waring**, with the Colonial Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), shared information on agricultural practices in the district and how SWCD is working with local producers on a variety of cost-share programs. Interest in cost-share programs has risen over the years, with cover crops as something they are focusing on.



Jim Wallace, Colonial Soil and Water Conservation District



Robert Waring, Colonial Soil and Water Conservation District

Richard Street, with the James River Association (JRA), shared that the James River was considered one of the most polluted rivers in the country in the mid-70's. Working together to restore the water quality in the river, the James River is now considered by the University of Maryland as one of the healthiest rivers in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. The JRA partners with others to implement conservation and habitat restoration solutions throughout the watershed and conduct environmental education.



Richard Street, James River Association

Conference Room Day

Keynotes

Gary Frazer, retired Assistant Director for Ecological Services, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Gary shared his experience, overseeing the division that manages the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Gary believes that the ESA is a catalyst for action, and although the ESA is a regulatory program of the USFWS, "we really build lasting conservation through trust, relationships, and partnerships."

Stefanie Taillon, Secretary, Natural and Historic Resources, Commonwealth of Virginia. Stefanie shared that 85% of Virginia's land is privately owned. Therefore, "partnerships between governmental and non-governmental organizations and private landowners are absolutely vital to conserving and sustaining the rich abundance of natural resources we are so fortunate to have in Virginia." Environmental sustainability and economic sustainability can go "hand-in-hand," with a balance of protecting our environment and fostering local economies.



Gary Frazer, retired Assistant Director for Ecological Services, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



Stefanie Taillon, Secretary, Natural and Historic Resources, Commonwealth of Virginia



Partnerscapes Panel

Steve Jester, Partnerscapes Executive Director, moderated the panel, with several Partnerscapes board members providing heartfelt examples of how they got involved in Partnerscapes and how it has impacted their lives. **Bill Sproul, Jim Stone, Russell Davis, Reese Thompson II, and Jake Yancey** all shared their stories.

Partnerscapes got its start through the first PLPD, put on by the Blackfoot Challenge and the Montana Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) program, with funding coming from an Innovations in American Government Award. Partnerscapes started out west and quickly grew into a national organization, with a landowner-led board of directors and an executive director. Some of the common threads throughout the panel discussion were how nothing gets done without trust and relationships with people.



As Russell Davis said so well, **"It is about family, neighbors, and community."** Great things are happening everywhere. The strength of Partnerscapes is the ability to bring that landowner perspective together across the country.

Upper Roanoke Restoration Partnership Panel

Steve Living, VDWR, moderated the panel. The panel included **Louise Finger**, VDWR stream restoration biologist; **John Eustis**, Executive Director, New River Land Trust; and **Courtney Sutphin Hebdon**, a Virginia landowner.

They discussed how collaborative partnerships have come together on working lands, balancing species recovery needs with landowner goals, needs, and interests. When panelists were asked what the keys to success were, common responses included respect, building trust, collaboration, and communication. The positive relationships formed on individual projects led to the success of multiple projects with neighboring landowners. Steve closed with a quote, "when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it is hitched to everything else in the universe." This, he said, sums up the outstanding work these partners have done together.



Virginia Conservation Partnerships Panel

Brian Van Eerden

was the moderator of the panel. The panel included **Bill Owen**, Virginia landowner;

Becky Gwynn, Executive Deputy Director, VDWR;

Dave Beals, City of Williamsburg Director, Colonial SWCD; and

Rob Farrell, State Forester, Virginia Department of Forestry. The panelists all emphasized that to have healthy connected habitat for wildlife, it is essential to build relationships with private landowners.



Brian Van Eerden, Virginia Pinelands Program Director, TNC

Bill shared that it is not only about the funding but also about the technical expertise and enthusiasm that biologists bring to the table. It is about people, personal relationships, and trust. Becky shared



Bill Owen, Virginia landowner

that it is important that all the partners embrace the shared values, vision, and desired outcomes. Being reliable and holding ourselves accountable is essential. Dave said, "we have a very specific mission we aim for—being a trusted agent." If we can't help them, we connect them with others who can. Rob shared that if we all identify our strengths, and our strengths address the problem, that's how we are the most effective.

One of the issues that was discussed was losing institutional knowledge. Panelists shared that it is important that those in the agencies with a great



deal of knowledge and experience transfer that knowledge to the next generation. It was recognized that with government funding cuts, that has become increasingly harder to do.

Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program Update



Shelly Kelly, landowner from the Sandhills of Nebraska, shared information at a national level and then stepped the presentation down to her own firsthand experiences working with the PFW program in Nebraska. Nationally since 1987, the

PFW program has helped more than 25,000 landowners to complete more than 40,000 projects, restoring more than six million acres of habitat for suites of wildlife species.



Shelly Kelly, landowner from the Sandhills of Nebraska

Shelly shared that these accomplishments have been made with a small staff of just 200 people placed strategically in focus areas across the nation. Shelly's experience with the PFW program in Nebraska is that it is one of the most effective and efficient programs that she has worked with.

Southeast Virginia Private Lands Biologist/Landowner Presentation

Bob Glennon, Conservation Management Institute at Virginia Tech, shared that he is one of seven private lands biologists that cover the southeastern portion of the state. They do forest thinning, firebreak construction and maintenance, prescribed burning, brush management, and herbaceous weed treatments. One thing that Bob emphasized was the importance of being a good listener when working with private landowners.



Bob Glennon, Conservation Management Institute at Virginia Tech

Jason Derick, a Virginia landowner, shared his unique perspective as a life-long Marine Veteran who purchased a 60-acre farm three years ago. Jason started researching the various programs that he could take advantage of and started putting them together. He now has successfully restored bobwhite quail and other wildlife species to his property and is excited to continue to do more.



Jason Derick, a Virginia landowner

Baber Mills Dam Removal

The Baber Mills Dam was located along Rock Island Creek, which is a tributary of the James River. The dam was built in 1827 and was a fish passage barrier. Weyerhaeuser owns the land and Daniel Hanks, an aquatic ecologist with Weyerhaeuser,

got interested in removing the dam when they discovered that the endangered James spiny mussel was present in the creek. Together with the VDWR and USFWS, they were able to remove the dam and restore the creek for the endangered mussel and a suite of priority fish species. **Louise Finger** and **Alan Weaver**, VDWR, shared that pre-and-post surveys have shown positive results and that the dam removal is providing fish passage and dispersal of mussel populations.



Alan Weaver, VDWR

Chesapeake Bay Panel



Julie Peebles, Senior Director of Public Policy, Ducks Unlimited

Julie Peebles, Senior Director of Public Policy for Ducks Unlimited, was the Moderator for the panel. She shared that Chesapeake Bay extends into six states (New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia) and the District of Columbia. It is the largest estuary in the United States. Many partners have come together over the years to support the Bay. **Ben Sagara**, statewide wetlands biologist for VDWR; **Tim Brown**, landowner on the eastern shore of Virginia; and **Chase Colmorgen**, Farm Bill biologist with Ducks Unlimited (DU);



Chase Colmorgen, Farm Bill biologist, Ducks Unlimited and Tim Brown, Virginia landowner

shared their story about how they are working together to accomplish conservation work on the Chesapeake Bay.

Chase shared that for the past six years the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Working Lands for Wildlife program has been working closely with DU through the Delmarva Wetland Partnership (also including TNC and VDWR). They are trying to increase their outreach efforts and capacity, while also learning from landowners what they believe the barriers are to further success.



Ben Sagara, statewide wetlands biologist, VDWR

Ben shared that the voluntary conservation work they do is key to success. "In order to maximize effectiveness, nutrient reduction efforts need to be paired with these habitat protection and improvement projects, if we ever want to see the Bay-wide system that we are all shooting for."

Tim shared his experience as a landowner on the eastern shore of Virginia. He mentioned that his land is under easement, protecting those lands to support wildlife and water quality. He has worked with DU and other partners on several projects, including cover crops and wetland restoration to support suites of wildlife species—ducks being his favorite!

One of the common threads discussed on the panel was trust and how that was key to the success of the partnership. In addition, outreach and communication are particularly important, as well as reliable timelines and engagement by the partners before and after the project is complete.



Jeremy Roberts



Steve Jester, Executive Director, Partnerscapes



Bill Sproul

Minnesota PLPD 2026

Steve Jester and **Bill Sproul** gave an update on the next PLPD, which will be held in Minnesota in September of 2026. The PFW program will be celebrating its 40th anniversary. Minnesota is the perfect place to host PLPD for the anniversary, given the birthplace of the PFW program was in the Prairie Pothole Region. The very first PFW private landowner agreement was written and signed in Minnesota. The USFWS PFW program, as well as the partners and landowners, are excited to welcome you to the 2026 PLPD.

Conference Closing Keynote Address

Matt Lohr, Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry for the Commonwealth of Virginia, gave an excellent presentation on agriculture throughout Virginia. He also shared a wonderful story about the importance of working together to achieve our common goals, adding humor throughout his keynote address.



Matt Lohr, Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry for the Commonwealth of Virginia



Conclusion and Thank You

Many thanks to all the individuals and organizations in Virginia who were involved with the planning and delivery of PLPD. Thank you to the attendees, speakers, sponsors, and co-hosts who made the event a tremendous success. The event was extremely educational, as well as inspirational. Everyone went home with new innovative ideas, new contacts, and new friendships that we will take into our own operations and partnerships back home. We are excited to continue to build upon collaborative conservation efforts across the country and expand our network.

SAVE THE DATE!

*The 18th PLPD will
be in Minneapolis,
Minnesota, in
September 2026.*

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