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Opinion: Virginia must build on its protection for forests

by Bettina Ring

If you were asked to imagine the coastal plain of Southeast Virginia, what would come to mind? Perhaps beaches spotted with birds, dunes punctuated with high grasses, or the oysters, fish and other bounties of the sea. You might even picture the magnificent sunrises that grace our coastal communities each morning.

But when I think about Southeast Virginia, one image stands out: forests. The incredible pine savannas of this region are rich with some of the most biologically productive and diverse forests in North America, dating back thousands of years.

Born in Craig County, I spent my childhood exploring the forests of Appalachia. Living in this special place inspired my career as a forester, which eventually led to my appointment as Virginia state forester followed by Virginia secretary of Agriculture and Forestry. I am proud to have played a role in making Virginia a leader in forest conservation, especially in helping to restore the longleaf pine savannas of the Southeast and returning fire to its natural role as a tool for managing native species.

Longleaf pine once dominated the coastal plain, blanketing more than 90 million acres from Virginia to Texas. But by 1893, this sprawling forest was harvested to near extinction. A census conducted in 1998 revealed that just 200 mature longleaf pine trees remained in Virginia, down from the more than 1 million acres that once extended south from the James River.

As The Nature Conservancy's new Virginia state director, I come to the organization having witnessed the power of collaboration between government agencies, university partners, non-profits, the private sector and individual landowners in improving the health and expanse of Virginia's longleaf pine forests, as well as the hundreds of species that depend on them. A prime example of this collaboration can be observed at The Nature Conservancy's Piney Grove Preserve, just more than an hour's drive from Virginia Beach.

For 25 years, The Nature Conservancy has worked with partners to restore longleaf pine at Piney Grove Preserve and surrounding conservation lands. Restoring longleaf requires active management, including frequent controlled burns in concert with state and federal agencies and highly trained volunteers.

Resistant to wind, pests and drought, longleafs actually depend on recurring fire disturbances to thrive — a fact well-known to and employed by Indigenous communities. Home to a growing population of red cockaded-woodpeckers — Virginia’s rarest bird — Piney Grove has become a story of success, showing us what can be achieved through strong partnerships and with proper investment.

While forests are certainly important for their role as habitat, they also offer natural beauty, recreational enjoyment, carbon absorption, clean drinking water and a valuable economic resource. Forestry is the third largest industry in Virginia, generating \$23 billion annually and supporting 108,000 jobs across the commonwealth. Management includes a wide range of activities: timber harvesting and regrowth, fire management and restoration of native species, and recreation. Every aspect of our investment in forests creates a ripple effect, supporting livelihoods and quality of life for all Virginians.

As Gov. Glenn Youngkin and his administration prepare their biennial budget proposal, I urge consideration for increased funding for programs that conserve forests. The Virginia Land Conservation Foundation and Land Preservation Tax Credit allow landowners to voluntarily conserve their lands, but both programs are oversubscribed. In addition, state agencies such as the Department of Forestry, Department of Conservation and Recreation, and Department of Wildlife Resources need additional funding to tap into federal conservation dollars currently available — dollars that could go to other states if we don’t provide the required matching funds.

Conservation repeatedly cuts across party lines, with 70% of Virginians supporting public spending to prevent the loss of natural areas and open spaces. Our forests and natural resources must receive recognition in our state budget proportional to the influence they have on millions of Virginians’ lives. Every person in the commonwealth today and in the future deserves to enjoy the magic and productivity of Virginia’s forests, including the mighty longleaf pine.

Bettina Ring is the Virginia state director of The Nature Conservancy. She previously served as Virginia secretary of Agriculture and Forestry (2018–2022), Virginia state forester (2014–2018), and as chief sustainability and diversity officer with the Sustainable Forestry Initiative.