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Celebrating and Investing in Pinelands Restoration

Our forests clearly are important for their role as habitat, and they offer natural beauty, recreational enjoyment, carbon absorption, clean drinking water and a valued economic resource. Every person in Virginia deserves to enjoy the magic and productivity of Virginia's forests, including the mighty longleaf pine. Virginia is the northern front of a national campaign to restore climate-resilient longleaf pine, and I am elated that our model partnership—starting 25 years ago at Piney Grove Preserve—played a key role in federal support being renewed for at least the next 15 years. Your support, too, has been vital every step of the way, and I thank you for helping to restore our iconic Southern longleaf pine forests.

Bettina K. Ring

Bettina K. Ring, State Director

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Examining a young longleaf pine tree at Piney Grove Preserve © Kyle LaFerriere

Success Breeds Success

Longleaf celebration yields new national commitment

The Nature Conservancy announced 25 years ago that we were launching a major forest restoration initiative from our recently acquired Piney Grove Preserve near Wakefield. Today, Piney Grove and the surrounding Virginia Pinelands are the northern vanguard of America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative—the largest forest restoration effort in North America. In late 2023, the United States departments of Agriculture, Defense and Interior culminated a celebration of progress to date (restoration actions have surpassed 20 million acres) by extending their support for another 15 years. "Longleaf pine is vital to the culture, ecology and economies of the South," declared Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. Explore our Virginia Pinelands at **nature.org/longleafva**.

TNC Helps Expand Clinch River State Park

In late 2023, TNC's Clinch Valley program acquired a scenic 146-acre property along a horseshoe bend in the Clinch River. The land will be transferred to the state to expand Clinch River State Park. Program director Brad Kreps calls this key addition to the park "a big win for nature and people in Southwest Virginia."

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TNC's Bo Lusk deploying oyster castle © Mark Schwenk, volunteers making Oyster Catchers © Britt Collins/TNC, new oyster growth © Bo Lusk/TNC

A Natural Solution

Living shoreline helps protect coastal community

This past November, volunteers helped The Nature Conservancy put the last oyster castle in place, completing a nearly four-year restoration project designed to strengthen a marsh island just offshore from the town of Wachapreague's waterfront. "We used oyster reefs to stem erosion and fortify the island shoreline against storms," says Bo Lusk, coastal scientist at The Nature Conservancy's Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve. The low-lying Eastern Shore town is susceptible to climate impacts such as rising sea levels and stronger, more frequent storms. As storms roll in and push larger waves from the Atlantic Ocean toward the mainland, an intricate system of marsh and barrier islands serve as natural buffers that deflect and disperse some of that energy. The restoration site stands between the town and a broad bay whose waters have been chipping away at these protective marshes. TNC and our partners undertook this project to test different structures on which oysters can live and build, as well as to measure how effectively these ever-growing reefs can stem erosion and, potentially, enable the marsh to spread. Over the course of the project, 160 volunteers helped deploy 10,000 concrete castles, and they helped make and install 1,600 Oyster Catchers—a new design by Sandbar Oyster Company using lighter, biodegradable materials. Already, the once-crumbling island shoreline is teeming with oysters. Learn more about our conservation work on the Eastern Shore at **nature.org/vvcr**.

"We used oyster reefs to stem erosion and fortify the island shoreline against storms."

Bo Lusk, Coastal Scientist

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Fishing for Answers About Offshore Wind Construction

Questions about offshore wind energy often focus on impacts to birds, but what about ocean life? Marine scientists from The Nature Conservancy's Virginia-based Mid-Atlantic Seascape program are undertaking the first-ever study of how fish respond to the construction of wind turbines.

A new agreement between TNC and NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) is enabling the research, which is taking place through 2027 at the Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind (CVOW) research site, located 27 miles off the coast of Virginia Beach. Developed and operated by Dominion Energy, CVOW is the second offshore wind farm operating in the United States, with two operating turbines and 176 more on the way.

School of Atlantic spadefish © Greg McFall

"More than 3,000 new offshore wind turbines are expected to be installed off the East Coast by 2030," says TNC marine scientist Brendan Runde. "While we need renewable energy, it is also critical that we understand how this development affects marine species. The more we know, the more we can advise on how to avoid or minimize those impacts." The study results will inform future environmental impact assessments and management of wind projects.