

PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

*"Conservation is a state of harmony
between men and land."
~ Aldo Leopold*

Conservation is more than just an environmental endeavor; it is about cultivating a deep and enduring relationship between people and the land. This philosophy is what drove a group of residents of northern Virginia to form the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC) over 50 years ago.

Nestled in the eastern foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Virginia's northern Piedmont is known for its scenic beauty, productive farms and forests and a landscape steeped in history. With the opening of Dulles International Airport in 1962 and the escalating pressures of development, urban sprawl was on a seemingly unstoppable path. The women and men who founded PEC were determined to build an organization to protect against this unbridled growth and ensure the long-term sustainability of the region.

Established as a land trust, PEC's work centers on land and water conservation, enhancing wildlife habitats and the expansion of public access. Encompassing nine counties, PEC has successfully protected over 580,000 acres of land; with a goal to eventually see one million acres under conservation.

PEC continuously works to bridge the gap between commercial development and environmental sustainability, telling the story of conservation and its importance to creating and maintaining vibrant, healthy communities. This work includes safeguarding productive family farms through conservation easements and advocating at state level on legislation impacting land use and conservation.

But effectively communicating the importance of conservation often demands more innovative approaches to grab attention. Conservation Speed Dating allows landowners and conservation professionals to connect over ideas shared on property maps rather than numbers exchanged on cocktail napkins. When a connection sparks, new conservation projects are born. PEC's Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows provides the opportunity for non-farm residents to experience the joys of gardening and farming. Since 2019, the farm has donated over 184,000 pounds of produce to local food pantries, ensuring that community members in need have access to fresh, healthy food.

As Virginia undergoes rapid technological and environmental changes, PEC faces a growing challenge: the explosive rise of data centers. While crucial for powering our digital infrastructure, they come with significant environmental costs.

A 2024 report from the real estate firm Cushman & Wakefield estimates 44,600 megawatts (44.6 GW) of data center capacity is in development worldwide. And Northern Virginia is the epicenter of that growth - at more than twice the size of the next largest market in the world, Beijing. In total, Virginia has over 63 million square feet of data center space on 7,200 acres of land, with an additional 180 million square feet of approved data center space in the pipeline. That's equivalent to about 1,000 Walmart Super Centers in size and would likely require more energy than twenty North Anna Nuclear Generating Stations could produce[1].

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This rapid growth has brought Virginia's data center market to the forefront of the global industry. However, it has also raised concerns about the environmental costs. Data centers require vast amounts of energy and water for operations and cooling, leading to increased pressure on local resources. Additionally, the construction of new transmission lines to meet these energy demands is causing community pushback due to concerns about environmental, visual and land-use impacts.

PEC has been at the global forefront of advocating for more responsible, sustainable practices within the data center sector. Through its Virginia Data Center Reform Coalition, it is working to raise awareness of the cumulative environmental impact of these massive facilities and pushing for smarter, cleaner development practices. With better planning and collaboration, PEC believes that it is possible to balance the demands of a growing digital economy with the need to protect natural resources. PEC's continued efforts to advocate for more transparency and improved oversight are key to shaping a future where data centers can thrive without compromising environmental and community well-being.

At PEC, every day is an opportunity to work toward creating a more sustainable, livable world. As Chris Miller, president of PEC said during our interview, the progress of conservation is achieved through "relentless incrementalism"—the idea that consistent, small actions over time lead to significant, lasting change.

PEC remains committed to environmental stewardship, thoughtful development and community well-being. Through education, advocacy and innovative conservation practices, it is working to ensure that the Piedmont remains a beautiful, vibrant and healthy community for generations to come - and sharing its lessons with the global community.

You can find out more about PEC and the work that they do at: www.pecva.org.

[1] The North Anna Nuclear Generating Station net output is approximately 15,371 GWh per year and powers 450,000 homes in northeastern Virginia.

The success of our business is tied to the health and prosperity of the communities in which we operate.

Vipin Sahijwani
Lynx Investment Advisory



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