



New River Land Trust

# NEWS

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Issue 1

*Conserving farmland,  
forests, open spaces,  
and historic places  
in Virginia's  
New River region*

## A Record Year for Land Conservation

Conservation of award-winning farms, of land along the New River Trail and other scenic and wildlife-rich sites made 2003 a record year for conservation easements in the New River region. The New River Land Trust and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation worked with farmers and other landowners to conserve 2,715 acres in the New River watershed, including family farms, properties along the Little River and on Big Walker Creek in Giles County.

The Land Trust Alliance, the umbrella organization for all 1,200 land trusts, selected one of our easements as the lead for a nationwide press release this winter. Howard Dickerson and his conservation of his grandfather's 400-acre Floyd farm was a perfect example for the LTA of the importance and urgency of work in land conservation. You'll find stories about this and other important easements here in our newsletter.

These lands were saved thanks to your generous support. -- Elizabeth Obenshain



Dr. T. Marshall and Peggy Hahn on their Ellett Valley farm. Photo by Gene Dalton/*The Roanoke Times*.

### *Easement Protects Scenic Heart of the Ellett Valley*

The New River Land Trust and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation worked with the family of Dr. T. Marshall Hahn on a conservation easement that will protect forever 900 acres of farm and forestland in the Ellett Valley. The easement to VOF extends to the top of Paris Mountain, thus protecting the scenic view for much of Blacksburg.

Anne Hahn Hurst and her husband Leigh Hurst of Blacksburg and Elizabeth Hahn Chancey and her husband Douglas Chancey of Wilmington have donated easements on three tracts restricting intensive residential and commercial development of the property. The easement not only conserves pasture and mountain slopes along Lusters Gate Road, a designated scenic byway, it also protects 4,200 feet of the North Fork of the Roanoke River. "Certainly that farm represents the most significant landholding in the Ellett Valley," said Randi Lemmon, a longtime conservationist and land planner in the New River region.

The parcels that make up the property were originally acquired by former Virginia Tech President T. Marshall Hahn and are still home to Hahn and his wife, Margaret. "The impact of this easement on the community is hard to express," said NRLT Executive Director Elizabeth Obenshain. "The Hahns' easement conserves the scenic heart of one of the most beautiful sections of Montgomery County as well as preserving farmland and wildlife habitat. Their stewardship will also encourage interest in land conservation among other landowners."

Local developer Bill Ellenbogen called the easement "phenomenal" and described Paris Mountain as "the most significant viewshed in the Blacksburg area. The Hahn family's willingness to place an easement on their property is a tremendous boon to the community, and the citizens of Blacksburg will benefit from their generosity forever," said Ellenbogen.

*Continued on page 2*

Preservation of the land, which comprises much of the viewshed and stream corridor in the Ellett valley, “will help to ensure that this historic valley will largely remain in its rural character in the future for all of those who enjoy driving and biking there,” explained Lemmon, who is also a conservation easement appraisal specialist.

The Hahns’ easement is one of the largest donated in Western Virginia. “We are grateful for the stewardship ethic of Dr. and Mrs. Hahn and their two daughters in making this wonderful gift to our community,” said Obenshain.

### ***Green Subdivision: A Win for Conservation and the Developer***

A Blacksburg development company and two area land trusts working together have conserved open space and shown that smart growth can balance a community’s development needs and land conservation.

The developers of Coal Bank Ridge, Bill Ellenbogen and Steve Bodtke, worked with the New River Land Trust and the Western Virginia Land Trust to place a conservation easement on 92.6 acres of their new 225-acre subdivision. This large easement in a wooded subdivision on Blacksburg’s northern edge will preserve scenic mountain views for the community, create new recreational trails for area residents and also generate a profitable project for the developers.

The easement will also create a mile of wooded buffer between houses in the new development and Coal Bank Hollow Road, conserving the road’s rural character. The development will serve as a model that other developers can follow to both conserve important land and views while also ensuring their own bottom line. Coal Bank Ridge is located on the Blacksburg/ Montgomery County line where U.S. 460 begins its ascent of Brush Mountain. Two-thirds of the land is in Montgomery County and one third is in Blacksburg.

The Western Virginia and the New River land trusts will co-hold the conservation easement. This is one of several projects that the two land trusts have worked on cooperatively where their service areas overlap in the New River region.

The Coal Bank Ridge conservation easement will protect a popular view along U.S. 460 between Blacksburg and Giles County. It will also offer a network of hiking trails in a forest setting only minutes from downtown Blacksburg. Roger Holnback, executive director of the Western Virginia and Trust, said, “This is an example of a major developer

who is doing it right. We work hard to preserve farms and mountains, but realize that some land is going to be developed anyway. When preserving an entire tract isn’t an option, we’re eager to work with developers who are willing to think innovatively to preserve the best features of their land and end up with a better project for everybody.”



From left to right: Developers Bill Ellenbogen and Steve Bodtke, Beth Obenshain and Joyce Graham of the New River Land Trust, Roger Holnback and Gwen Mason of the Western Virginia Land Trust. Photo by Gene Dalton,

Joyce Graham, president of the New River Land Trust, praised the project as “a positive effort that balances development and the environment.”

This innovative development/conservation easement project was partly the result of Virginia’s generous new conservation easement tax credit. Landowners can receive a state income tax credit for 50 percent of the value of a donated easement. That tax credit, which can be sold for cash, can be worth thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars.

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### ***Could You Be A Conservation Buyer for a New River Site?***

A beautiful piece of land that runs from the New River Trail State Park up steep rock cliffs to a ridgetop with a view of a mile of the New River is for sale. The 38.8 acres is near Foster Falls, the headquarters of the state park. The realtor/co-owner of the land had planned to divide the site into four housing tracts but is now considering selling it as one piece for \$388,000. The land includes rock cliffs and a cave overlooking the trail. We’re searching for a buyer who would place the land under conservation easement and take advantage of generous state and federal tax credits/deductions. If you’re that person, please call Beth Obenshain at NRLT’s office, [540] 951-1704.

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## *Saving The Family Farm*

by Don Rude

Howard Dickerson, former Floyd County supervisor, cherishes the land that his family has farmed for more than 100 years and honors his ancestors who have owned the land since 1877. To protect the land and his family heritage, Dickerson worked with the New River Land Trust and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation to place an easement on his 378-acre farm in Willis.



Howard Dickerson on his farm in Floyd County. Photo by Don Rude.

The Land Trust Alliance, the national umbrella organization for 1,200 land trusts, selected Dickerson and his easement as the lead for a nationwide press release this fall on the importance of easements in conserving family lands. A conservation easement allows a landowner, such as Dickerson, to continue farming and other traditional uses of his land while providing generous tax benefits, some of which can be sold for cash.

Like many Virginians, Dickerson is alarmed by the increasing urbanization of rural Southwest Virginia. His interest in saving his farm led him to contact Elizabeth Obenshain, executive director of the New River Land Trust, and donate an easement to the Virginia Outdoors Foundation.

Dickerson will tell you proudly that he descends from Moses Dickerson, born circa 1740, who settled on the West Fork of the Little River later in the 18th century. Dickerson's farm was owned and farmed by his grandfather. He acquired sole ownership of the land after his grandparents' deaths. After military service in Vietnam, Dickerson became a full-time farmer, producing cattle and marketing cattle feed from his land.

A conservationist himself, Dickerson wanted to see the farm continue to be used for agriculture when he no longer

operates the farm, but he has no successor. He married late in life and his stepchildren have no interest in farming. He had thought of granting an easement for several years but could not afford to absorb the costs associated with the transfer. The General Assembly's recent enactment of a bill granting conservation tax credits that can be sold for cash made his wish economically feasible.

Dickerson has become one of the area's most effective advocates for land conservation. He has spoken at a NRLT landowner seminar on easements and at NRLT presentations to the Floyd County supervisors and Floyd County Young Farmers' Association.



### *River Rally on the New*

**Date: Saturday, May 8**

**Time: 1 p.m.**

**Where: Foster Falls - New River Trail  
State Park Headquarters**

**Who's the host: New River Trail Conservation  
Fund, National Committee for the New River,  
New River Land Trust**

**Who's invited: Paddlers, hikers, fishermen,  
conservationists from the  
New River watershed.**

**Come take a cool outing and hear  
what is happening in, to, and for our great  
watershed and river.**

**Hotdogs and potluck at 1 p.m.**

**Speakers at 1:30 p.m.**

**Recreate the rest of the afternoon.  
Stay and hear the spring peepers  
at Foster Falls before you go home!**



## ***Galax Landowners' Easement Protects New River Trail***

David and Carolyn Matthews have protected 1.4 miles along the New River Trail and Chestnut Creek in Galax by donating a conservation easement on their 50-acre property. Working with the New River Land Trust and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the Matthews filed an easement that will keep their land in its natural state and protect the trail's view in perpetuity.

Their easement is even more important because it mirrors a conservation easement on property on the other side of the trail on land owned by the Leonard family of Galax, thus protecting both sides of this beautiful trail corridor.

Dixie Leonard, one of the property owners on the opposite side of the trail, is vice president of the New River Land Trust. The Matthews bought and moved to their scenic, hilly property in Galax from Northern Virginia. The land lies along Chestnut Creek and the trail before rising in steep, wooded hills.

The couple could have cleared the timber and sold house sites. Houses would then have loomed over a popular portion of the New River Trail within the Galax town limits. Instead, the Matthews have conserved the land with an easement. Their stewardship of the land will benefit outdoor lovers forever who have made the New River Trail one of Virginia's most popular destinations.

## ***Grayson Farmer Conserves Demonstration Farm***

In Grayson County, a landowner has donated a conservation easement on his award-winning farm that will ensure his 131 acres remain forever as productive farmland. O. Donald Philen Jr. of Grayson County, a member of the New River Soil and Water Conservation District Board, has spent years improving the soil and water quality on his farm. He received the Governor's Clean Water Farm Award in 1992. Philen's farm was also used as a demonstration farm to show other farmers how they could improve their land's productivity while reducing erosion and water pollution.

"The reason I'm doing this is because I don't want this farm split up. I want it to stay one unit," said Philen, who spent his career as a soil scientist in North Carolina. He hopes his children will farm the land, "but if not, I'm not going to let it be split up into subdivisions."



The Matthews and Leonard families have protected both sides of the new River Trail. Beth Obenshain and Dixie Leonard are shown here enjoying the New River Trail. Photo by Tamara Vance.

The Philen easement is a classic example of how the New River Land Trust and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation work with landowners to help save family farms. Elizabeth Obenshain, executive director of the Land Trust, said new state tax credits for conservation easements that can be sold for cash now allow landowners to hold onto their property and still harvest the funds they may need for retirement or other expenses. For land-rich and cash-poor farmers, this can make a conservation easement a smart financial move.

Philen will be working with the New River Land Trust this year to spread information about conservation easements to other Grayson County landowners, especially those who have land along the New River.



Two views of the beautiful farmland and forest in Grayson County preserved by O. Donald Philen, Jr. Photo by Ruth Babylon.



## *New River Trail Conservation Project*

Anyone who has ever hiked, biked or ridden a horse along the New River Trail State Park knows that this 60-mile park is one of the state's natural jewels. Many users assume that the wildflowers, the farmland, the rugged cliffs and forests are a protected part of the park. Wrong. The trail and land all along the New River are under unprecedented development pressure.

That's why the New River Land Trust pursued a U.S. Forest Service grant through the State Department of Forestry's Urban Forestry Division to increase public awareness and raise funds to protect the park.

Fortunately, this area's best loved environmental champion, Liza Field, eagerly accepted the job of project manager when we received the grant. Since then, Liza has organized hikes, tree plantings, a nursery and a rally to educate Secretary of Natural Resources Tayloe Murphy on the development threats facing the New. This is one of America's 14 National Heritage Rivers.



A children's outing group explores streambank care, native wildflowers, and the joys of July blackberries along the Cripple Creek section of New River. Photo by Sam Slemph.

Here are some of Liza's activities:

- Started a native tree nursery at Foster Falls with the help of volunteers and high school agriculture students. Seedlings will be sold to raise money for the park.

- Organized a conservation dialogue with Secretary Murphy, his wife and top staff. Local people, including high school students, spoke passionately about the changes that threaten their beloved river.
- Began a fund-raising drive to save land along the trail by developing a poster, brochures and donation envelopes promoting the New River Trail State Park Conservation Fund.
- Held outings and educational talks for the public and student groups along the trail--see the box following this article for our next big event.

Liza's active championing of the trail is also helping to connect the Land Trust with landowners along the trail. One landowner is now working with the Land Trust to find a conservation buyer rather than subdividing his property.



### *Redbud Ride on the New River Trail*

What better way to enjoy the beauty of early spring than looking through a horse's ears at redbud blossoms dotting the New River Trail. On Saturday, April 24, the New River Trail Conservation Project will sponsor a "Redbud Ride."

The outing will start at 11 a.m. from the State Park headquarters at Foster Falls. Foster Falls is in Wythe County south of Fort Chiswell. Even if you don't have a horse, come for a two-legged romp through the refreshing scenery.

Whether you can join us or not, you can still help to save threatened land along the trail and river corridor with a donation to the the New River Trail Conservation Project. Make out the check to the Virginia Outdoors Foundation and note that it is for the Trail Conservation Project. Mail to: VOF/302 Royal Lane/Blacksburg, Va. 24060. Every penny donated goes to land conservation.

For more information about the Redbud Ride, contact the New River Land Trust office at [540] 951-1704 or Liza Field at [fieldnotes@wiredog.com](mailto:fieldnotes@wiredog.com)



## *Giles Landowner's Easement Protects Walker Creek*

The first conservation easement in Giles County, donated by hunter and businessman James Blakeney, will protect a critical portion of Big Walker, Little Walker and Walker creeks, which come together on the boundary of his property.

Blakeney worked through the New River Land Trust and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation on the easement, which will protect the steeply wooded slopes of Walker Mountain bordering the Jefferson National Forest. The Virginia Outdoors Foundation will hold the easement.



The 271 acres of Blakeney land fronting on a scenic stretch of Virginia 100 is a rich habitat for both game and birds. Photo by Ruth Babylon.

This easement has important public conservation value for several reasons, according to Tamara Vance, VOF's executive director. Blakeney agreed to special provisions in his easement to protect the water quality of Big Walker Creek, which flows through the property.

In addition, Blakeney's easement confirms public access to Walker Creek for a canoe put-in on his property. Big Walker, Little Walker and Walker creeks converge on his property's boundary and flow along the edge of his property.

Blakeney and his wife, who now live in Charlotte, N.C., are building a home on the site. Their generous donation of an easement has sparked interest among other landowners along Big Walker Creek to protect this scenic and wildlife-rich area of Giles County.



## *Questions and Answers about Easements*

*Q: For a farmer reaching retirement age, is there any option other than selling the farm to finance retirement?*

*A: A conservation easement allows a farmer to harvest cash from a farm while still holding onto their family land.*

*Q. How does it work?*

*A. The New River Land Trust and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation can help a landowner negotiate a conservation easement that guarantees their land will stay as farmland and open space forever. In exchange, the landowner receives a state income tax credit that can be converted to cash as well as state and federal tax deductions.*

*Q. How do I convert the tax credit to cash?*

*A: The state gives a landowner who has donated an easement a generous tax credit worth 50 percent of the value of the conservation easement. This tax credit can be worth thousands of dollars. The landowners can use this tax credit to wipe out all their state income taxes over six years. Any amount the landowners cannot use, they can sell for cash through a broker. Last year, most tax credits were bought at 80 cents on the dollar from landowners and sold at 90 cents on the dollar to people with large tax bills.*

*Q. Can you give me an example of how this might work?*

*A: Take a landowner who has a farm worth \$500,000. He puts his land under easement. He then hires a qualified conservation appraiser to determine what his farm was worth before the easement and what it is worth with the easement. That difference is the value of the conservation easement. On this farm, the easement was worth \$200,000. The state now gives the family a tax credit for \$100,000 — 50 percent of the easement's value.*

*Q. How does the farmer then sell the tax credit?*

*A: The farmer meets with his accountant and decides that over six years he can use \$20,000 of that tax credit to cancel all his state income taxes. The rest, \$80,000, he will sell either through a broker or directly to people he knows who have high incomes and large tax bills. Those who sold tax credits through a broker last year usually received 80 cents on the dollar. If that rate continues this year, the landowner would receive \$64,000 in cash — 80 percent of the \$80,000.*

*Q. Do I still own my farm if I donate an easement?*

*A: Absolutely. That's why an easement can be a good deal for a landowner. You still own your land. You can farm it. You can timber it. You can hunt on it. You can give it your kids. You can sell it. What you and future owners cannot do is to develop the property either as a subdivision or for commercial or industrial use.*

## *Saving on Taxes and Saving Land*

Landowners who generously donated conservation easements this past year had a big question-mark hanging over their decision. Would they be able to sell their conservation tax credits in 2003 - the first year these tax credits were for sale? For many easement donors, the sale of their tax credits is essential to help them keep operating their farms or generate money for their retirement needs.

Thanks to civic-minded professionals, business owners and other taxpayers here in the New River Valley, the Land Trust was able to help landowners find buyers. Most landowners received 85 cents on the dollar, an excellent rate for the sale of tax credits. Diane Green, a New River Land Trust board member and treasurer, gave generously of her time and energies to help landowners and credit buyers.

This credit is a good deal for taxpayers. It saves you 10 percent to 15 percent on state income taxes. It also helps save land. The process is simple. You don't have to buy a large amount. We are looking for tax credit buyers to match with landowners for 2004. If you are interested in buying tax credits, please call Elizabeth Obenshain at [540] 951-1704 or e-mail [nrlt@newriverlandtrust.org](mailto:nrlt@newriverlandtrust.org).

## *New Land Trust Officers*

The New River Land Trust has had the good fortune to be led by a dedicated group of officers during its first two years, and is now set to install new officers at its February meeting.

Joyce Graham, a local farm owner and developer, has served as our president and been an excellent advocate for conservation. One of Graham's goals when she left teaching at Radford University was to work toward the



Joyce Graham, outgoing NRLT President.

protection of farms and forests throughout our area.

She believes that her personal interest in farming and her professional work as a developer focusing on planning environmentally responsible residential communities is very much at the heart of

what NRLT is about. Graham says, "My involvement with the NRLT has allowed me to become friends and work with many people committed to conserving the best of our area. I truly cherish the time I've spent working on such important causes with really wonderful people."

Lesley Howard, who convened the first meeting to start a land trust four years ago, is nominated to be our next president. Howard, who has served as the Land Trust's secretary, has long been active in the New River region as a planner and community leader.



Leley Howard, incoming NRLT president

"The opportunity to serve as the NRLT president in the coming year is both humbling and thrilling. The land trust is making a difference in people's lives and in our shared landscapes. I'm looking forward to the chance to participate in continuing the efforts that are already underway, and starting new projects that will reach additional families and landowners."

Dixie Leonard from Galax will continue as the board's vice president. The Leonard family farm lies along the New River Trail and is protected by a conservation easement. Leonard was instrumental this year in working with a neighbor and the Land Trust to place an easement on an adjoining tract that will protect 1.4 miles along the New River Trail.

Continuing with us as treasurer will be Diane Green, a Blacksburg accountant who has been with us since 2001. Green worked long hours in December helping easement donors negotiate the intricacies of the new state tax credits and find buyers for their tax credits. Her work was critical to the success of our local conservation efforts.

The Land Trust is also adding new board members. We'll profile them in our next newsletter as well as publicize their names in the local media.



**Don't forget to visit our website at  
[newriverlandtrust.org](http://newriverlandtrust.org)**

## *Land Trust Member? Yes, That's You*

**L**and is being saved here in the New River region, thanks to each of you who have donated your dollars and your energies to the New River Land Trust.

Some of you have expressed confusion about whether you are a Land Trust member. You become a member of the Trust when you make a donation. That membership is good for one full year.

Although most of you join following our annual membership mailing in the fall, we are starting a rolling membership so that no matter when you make your donation, you will receive a full 12 months of membership from that date.

The benefits of membership include our biannual newsletter full of information about our land conservation successes, facts about how to save your land and the new tax credits you can buy to help landowners; invitations to our Land Trust events; and reduced/free tickets to our benefit concert. Best of all is the intangible satisfaction of knowing your membership makes you part of a winning effort to conserve land here in our own communities. We'll remind you it's time to renew shortly before your renewal date comes up.

We want to say a heart-felt "thank you" to all of our members for your generous donations this past year. We will list all of you in the fall newsletter. We had so much good news about easements for this letter that we wanted to use every inch of space to tell you how your dollars are helping to save land.

## *NRLT Board*

**Dick Barnett** - a landowner and soil district member from Elliston

**Britt Boucher** - a professional forestry planner operating from Blacksburg

**Joyce Graham** - a farm owner and developer from Elliston

**Diane Green** - a CPA who practices in Blacksburg

**Lesley Howard** - a former regional planner from Blacksburg

**Dixie Leonard** - a Carroll County farmer

**Bob Miller** - a retired school principal and Riner landowner

**Jerry Moles** - an environmentalist who has worked worldwide

**Jeff Waldon** - a wildlife biologist

**Carol Wampler** - a retired attorney and resident of Pulaski County

## *NRLT Staff*

**Elizabeth Obenshain** -

*Executive Director*

**Holly Taylor** *Administrative*

*Assistant*

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