

Buchanan Landowner, Land Trust, Soil and Water District Team to Save Wetlands, Streams

BUCHANAN—The Western Virginia Land Trust, the Mountain Castles Soil and Water Conservation District, and local landowner Sky Preece recently signed an agreement to protect a mile and a quarter of beautiful streambanks and a 21-acre wetland on Mr. Preece's scenic Lithia Road property.

By signing a conservation easement, Preece, the Land Trust, and the Soil and Water Conservation District agreed to forever protect the banks of Mill Creek, Back Creek, and Looney Creek from development, erosion, and pollution. The easement also protects a large wetland—the size of 16 football fields—on the property that is formed by a family of beavers who build large dams each winter on Back Creek. The wetland provides habitat for aquatic plants and animals and helps to filter dirt and animal waste from the water before it enters the James River. Large, wooded wetlands like Preece's are rare in the Blue Ridge and are usually only found east of Richmond.

"Our family has always enjoyed adventuring along the bold streams, through the hidden meadows, and across the quiet beaver ponds on our farm," said Preece. "There is joy and wisdom in nature you can't find anywhere else. But we realized that agricultural sewage from upstream was threatening our beautiful homeplace, not to mention destroying fish, wildlife, the rivers of Virginia, and the Chesapeake Bay."

Added Preece, "Then our neighbor, Greg Whitt, told us about the Western Virginia Land Trust. What a fine organization. They don't just talk about the environment. They do something about it. We are honored to work with the Land Trust to preserve the environment for the future, and for those citizens downstream."



WVLT Project Manager David Perry (left) and Sky Preece Stand on a beaver dam in a wetland on Preece's property.

"Sky has a beautiful property and he's really concerned about making sure the water his boys play in is clean and safe," said Land Trust Director Roger Holnback. "He can't control how clean the water is when it comes onto his property, but he's taken steps to make sure it's a little cleaner for the landowners downstream when it leaves."

According to the terms of the easement, Preece will keep the streambanks covered in trees and plants to help hold back the soil during floods. Although Preece doesn't keep cattle on the property, future owners may, and the easement doesn't allow livestock to stand in the creeks and stomp down the banks. Preece can't till the soil or build near the creeks. Trapping or hunting the beavers that help maintain the wetland is prohibited, as is killing otter or mink. But Preece, wife Dianne, and their two small sons will continue to enjoy the creeks and wetland for family canoe outings, cooling off on hot days, and camping trips, and they can maintain the trails that run along the creeks and the wetland.



Sky Preece, his wife Dianne, and their two boys pose for a picture on the porch of their Lithia Road home in Buchanan.

As a gesture of thanks to the Land Trust, Preece created a special DVD on his computer that shows his family canoeing in the beaver wetland. The video is available to watch on the Western Virginia Land Trust website at www.westernvirginialandtrust.org.

The Western Virginia Land Trust paid Preece for the easement with a grant from the Virginia Water Quality Improvement Fund provided by the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), via grant number WQIA-2006-26. The Land Trust has

completed 15 similar easements on streams and creeks in western Virginia, including three in Botetourt County: one on a property on the James River near Solitude and two on Sinking Creek properties near Eagle Rock.

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) considers Looney Creek and its tributaries to be impaired or “dirty” waters because bacteria levels in the streams exceed Virginia’s water quality standards. Levels of bacteria in the stream measured by DEQ indicate an increased risk of illness for people who come in direct contact with the water. The bacteria may come from livestock, failing septic systems, and “straight pipe” sewage systems that dump sewage directly into creeks and streams. DCR and the Mountain Castles Soil and Water Conservation District, with input from the community and other agencies, have developed an implementation plan to improve water quality on Looney Creek. The Mountain Castles Soil and Water Conservation District can offer farmers up to 75% of the cost to do agricultural Best Management Practices, such as fencing that keeps cattle out streams, or tree plantings on streambanks.

The Western Virginia Land Trust has helped to conserve over 56,000 acres of land since its founding in 1996, including more than 10,000 acres in Botetourt County. The mission of the Land Trust is “promoting the conservation of western Virginia’s natural resources—farms, forests, waterways, and rural landscapes.” In April, the City of Roanoke donated the largest conservation easement in Virginia history to the Land Trust and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation—6,185 acres in Carvins Cove Natural Reserve, most of which lies in southern Botetourt County. For more information, call the Land Trust at (540) 985-0000 or visit www.westernvirginialandtrust.org.

The Mountain Castles Soil and Water Conservation District’s mission is “to provide and to promote leadership in conservation of natural resources through stewardship and education programs.” The Mountain Castles Soil and Water Conservation District serves as a political subdivision of the Commonwealth of Virginia to assist in utilizing state, federal and private sector resources and makes decisions that enhance and protect natural resources, improve water quality, and will engage in actions that promote soil and water stewardship for all citizens of Botetourt and Craig Counties. For more information, call (540) 977-2698 ext. 3, or visit www.soil-water.org.