

Board of Forestry

Meeting Minutes - July 28, 2026



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Meeting Minutes

Convene Meeting, Call to Order

The Board of Forestry meeting was called to order at 10 a.m. by Chairperson Carolyn Mulligan at the Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP) building in Richmond, Virginia. The chairperson reminded the Board of the anti-trust policy legal requirements. Congratulations was extended to Ervin Bielmyer for his reappointment to the Board of Forestry and to Jackson Combs for his new appointment to the Board.

Roll Call

Board of Forestry Members Present

Ervin Bielmyer, Andrew Brown, Jackson Combs, Mike Harold, Carolyn Mulligan, Bill Osl, Scott Shallenberger, Chad Shelton and Vance Wright

Members Absent

Jamie Coleman, Jennifer Gagnon and Terry Godwin

Virginia Department of Forestry Present

State Forester Terry Lasher, Deputy State Forester Ed Zimmer, Chief of Administration Amanda Davis, Chief of Operations Robbie Talbert, Communications Director Greg Bilyeu, Chief Human Resources Officer John Habel, Policy and Legislative Analyst Nathan Thomson, Utilization and Marketing Program Manager Sabina Dhungana and Executive Assistant Mary Weaver.

Adoption of Agenda

Motion was made and seconded to approve the agenda as presented; all present were in favor.

Recognition of Guests and Visitors

Deputy Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry Benjamin Rowe; Adam Watkins, Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP); Julie Richmond, (VEDP); Ted Sniffin, (VEDP); Mary Wood (VEDP); Lindsay Bertozzi, (VEDP); Kevin Miller, (VEDP); Douglas Griffin, (VEDP); James Melton, (VEDP); Stephanie Agee, (VEDP); Travis Rickman, (VEDP); Rachel Henley, Virginia Farm Bureau ; Lesley Mosley, Virginia Forest Product Association (VFPA); Susan Seward, (VFPA); Jay Phaup, Virginia Forestry Association (VFA); Ryan Turman, Turman Group; Rob Davenport, Virginia Department of Agriculture Consumer Services (VDACS)

Hearing of Citizens

None

Approval of Minutes

A motion was made to approve March 18, 2026, Board of Forestry minutes with correction of Jason El Koubi's name, seconded; all present were in favor.

Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry Update

Deputy Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry Benjamin Rowe provided an update on Secretariat activities over the past six months, key initiatives currently underway and forthcoming opportunities relevant to Virginia's agriculture and forestry sectors. Secretary Katie Frazier and Assistant Secretary Caroline Buscaglia were attending engagements across the Commonwealth and internationally, and not able to attend.

- ◆ Secretariat Strategic Planning and Listening Sessions to inform the Farm and Forestry Prosperity Plan - During the recent legislative session, the Secretariat secured statutory authority requiring the development of a comprehensive four-year plan for economic development, market expansion, and industry promotion across agriculture and forestry.
 - Ten listening sessions, held statewide in collaboration with Extension and industry groups, gathered input from farmers and forestry professionals.
 - The information collected will inform a strategic plan expected to guide legislative, regulatory, and budgetary actions over the next four years.
 - The Secretariat is required to report annually to the Governor and the House and Senate Agriculture Committees on plan progress and industry outcomes.
- ◆ Domestic and International Market Development - Industry stakeholders expressed strong desire for new and expanded markets, particularly for forest products.
 - Governor Abigail Spanberger and Secretary Frazier conducted an international trade mission to the UK United Kingdom, France and Italy, engaging with multiple forestry-related organizations, including AstraZeneca (mass timber discussions), the British Embassy's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) division, Latham Timber, the Forestry Commission, and Italian and French commercial partners.
 - Feedback from the mission was positive and will inform future market development efforts.
- ◆ China remains Virginia's largest agriculture and forestry trade partner within the U.S. export landscape.
 - Despite the challenges posed by variable tariffs — currently approximately 12.5% — new shipments of logs and forest products have been sent to China this year.
 - Additional opportunities for grain exports are also emerging.
- ◆ Major improvements at the Port of Virginia were completed, including a \$450 million widening and deepening project that brings the port's channel depth to 55 feet.
 - These enhancements enable continuous two-way transit of ultra-large container vessels and reduce freight costs.
 - The project is part of a broader \$1.4 billion Gateway investment designed to expand infrastructure, enhance on-dock capabilities, and support double-stack rail operations.
 - Port improvements reinforce both trade competitiveness and national security at the Norfolk Naval Base.
- ◆ Governor Spanberger issued Executive Order 5 (EO-5) directing each Secretariat of the Commonwealth to develop plans for market expansion and customer engagement to combat tariffs.
 - The Agriculture and Forestry Secretariat has submitted their EO-5 plan and initiated early implementation.
 - Virginia Department of Agriculture Consumer Services (VDACS) has publicly listed trade missions and opportunities on their website. Alignment among VDACS, the Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF), and VEDP has improved significantly since January.
- ◆ Two major opportunities identified through industry outreach include:
 - Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF)
 - Discussions continue with Delegate Breanna Sewell, Boeing and Shell to support SAF production using forest residuals.

- A proposed \$20 million SAF tax credit bill may be revisited prior to the 2027 General Assembly session.
- Biomass
 - Biomass is referenced six times in Virginia's Climate Action Plan submitted to EPA, emphasizing its role in energy production and climate mitigation.
 - The plan highlights forest legacy programs, reforestation and urban/community forestry contributions.
- ◆ The state is developing a new Virginia Energy Plan.
 - An agriculture and forestry-focused listening session held at Virginia Farm Bureau underscored strong support for including biomass as a core component of the Commonwealth's energy strategy.
- ◆ Wood Council Establishment - The Wood Council was formally established under Executive Directive 2.
 - The Council's seven charges include wood-based business recruitment, technical assistance, marketing strategy, investment identification, workforce development, supply chain policy support, and evaluation of the Virginia Grown Forest Products Program.
 - Initial activities included a roundtable hosted by the Governor with significant forestry stakeholder participation.
- ◆ Hurricane Helene Block Grant Program - Virginia previously became the first state to operate a Hurricane Helene relief program.
 - The application portal was reopened from April 27 to July 1 to allow additional producers to participate.
 - To date, 230 applications have been paid; DOF and VDACS continue processing the remainder.
 - The Secretariat anticipates residual funds and intends to work with USDA and regional partners to repurpose the balance to support producers impacted by frost, freeze and drought.
- ◆ The Weldon Cooper Center will begin an updated agricultural and forestry economic impact study later this year.
 - A new component of this study will quantify the conservation value of agriculture and forestry, including contributions from Virginia's extensive Agricultural Best Management Practices program — the largest cost-share program in the United States.
 - Stakeholder input will be used to refine metrics and better articulate the sustainability and economic significance of these industries.

The Deputy Secretary concluded by noting that additional updates would be provided by Secretariat colleagues later in the meeting. The initiatives outlined — spanning strategic planning, market expansion, trade engagement, infrastructure advancement and energy innovation — are positioned to shape the future of Virginia's agriculture and forestry sectors.

State Forester's Report

State Forester Lasher acknowledged the effort required for foresters to meet in an urban setting and expressed appreciation for their presence. He welcomed returning Board member Ervin Bielmyer and new member Jackson Combs, noting the value of blending experienced voices with new participants to support the next generation of forestry professionals and manufacturers.

- ◆ DOF and the Secretariat continue to be actively engaged in policy discussions and forest industry development opportunities. Collaboration across agencies and stakeholders is producing tangible results rather than symbolic partnerships. The administration aims to demonstrate meaningful impacts by the end of its four-year term.
- ◆ State Forester Lasher reiterated the importance of Board members bringing forward constructive criticism and solution-oriented input. Each member represents a distinct sector of the forestry industry, offering critical insight into regional conditions and trends. The administration relies on these perspectives to identify barriers and opportunities across the Commonwealth.
- ◆ The Administration's three primary goals are working land conservation, economic development, workforce development, along with a fourth internal goal of taking care of agency personnel.
 - Workforce Development
 - Over the past six months, the State Forester engaged divisions across DOF and met with regional staff to better understand workforce needs.
 - DOF's current educational reach, mainly elementary and high school programs—remains insufficient.
 - Staff have been tasked with identifying new funding sources to expand efforts. A comprehensive workforce development plan is in development.
 - Working Land Conservation
 - DOF is exploring the potential acquisition of a new state forest near York State Park.
 - The region lacks a strong state forest presence, and the acquisition would support recreation, conservation, and maintaining timber supply for the industry.
 - DOF is coordinating with the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) and the Conservation Fund for the acquisition of the 2,700-acre property.
 - Economic Development
 - Deputy Secretary Rowe sufficiently covered market creation and industry growth initiatives.
- ◆ The Secretariat has challenged a fourth goal of taking care of agency personnel. State Forester Lasher provided an overview of key efforts underway to improve staff morale, retention, and operational efficiency.
 - Salary Compensation Study – A study comparing DOF positions with similar roles in other state agencies revealed disparities up to 20%. This issue is being elevated for inclusion in 2027 budget and legislative packages.
 - Career Path Development – DOF is establishing defined career paths to support advancement and professional growth for entry-level and mid-level staff.
 - Field Position Reclassification – Foresters previously classified as exempt will be shifted to non-exempt status to ensure overtime compensation for emergency response and fire operations.
 - Retention and Turnover Analysis – DOF is reviewing exit surveys and employment data to better understand attrition causes and improve retention strategies.
 - Western Regional Office Relocation – The office moved from Salem to Galax to better serve employees. The new facility offers improved amenities and more accessible service for staff.
 - Quarterly State Forester Communications – The agency holds quarterly webinars with staff to provide updates and allow direct, transparent Q&A with leadership.

- Security and Facility Improvements – Headquarters will receive a new security wall, additional cameras, flooring upgrades, carpeting improvements, and the near-completion of the long-planned “Wall of Wood.”
- Lunch & Learns and Sharpen the Saw Sessions – Virtual Lunch & Learns provide updates on topics such as proper use of AI technologies. Sharpen the Saw sessions offer hands-on training relevant to field operations.
- New DOF Intranet – “Canopy” – Launching August 3, the redesigned intranet will streamline access to policies, calendars and agency information, improving communication and reducing workflow barriers.
- Budget Management Improvements – DOF is strengthening program managers’ fiscal oversight of cost-share programs, block grants, and other expenditures. Regular reporting meetings ensure accurate tracking of public funds.
- Enhanced Communications and Social Media Presence – DOF’s communications team has increased public outreach via social media channels.
- Strategic Management Team (SMT) Reorganization – SMT is now led solely by field staff to encourage open dialogue without executive influence. Several agency changes, including exempt status revision resulting directly from SMT input.

A question was raised regarding the status of the Mountain Gateway Community College Forestry Education Program.

- ◆ Enrollment had declined, and the retirement of a key faculty member (Billy Newman) jeopardized accreditation.
- ◆ The college temporarily questioned whether to continue offering the program. As of last week, the program is confirmed to continue operation in the fall.
- ◆ Two new adjunct professors have been hired:
 - Ben Leatherland – teaching ecology and soils, with a strong environmental background.
 - Trevor Seville – instructing dendrology, harvesting, forest protection, and sawmilling; holds a Virginia Tech master’s degree and significant silvicultural experience.
- ◆ Mountain Gateway also plans to offer a new community forestry/arborist qualification.
- ◆ DOF is optimistic about strengthening enrollment and program stability.

Board members reflected on the broader issue of compensation within forestry.

- ◆ Forestry remains Virginia’s third-largest industry, and Board members highlighted the need for agency salaries to reflect that priority.
- ◆ Increasing compensation would support workforce recruitment, bolster educational pipeline programs, and help attract top talent who may otherwise choose higher-paying fields.
- ◆ State Forester Lasher acknowledged these points and committed to incorporating the feedback into forthcoming advocacy efforts.

Significant progress is underway in personnel support, conservation planning, industry collaboration, and educational stability. These efforts are intended to strengthen DOF’s capacity to serve the Commonwealth’s forestry sector. The agency remains committed to ensuring staff well-being, operational effectiveness, and long-term industry growth.

Informational Items

Presentation by the Virginia Economic Development Partnership

VEDP Senior Vice President International Trade Stephanie Agee, VEDP Vice President Economic Competitiveness Adam Watkins and VEDP Associate Manager, Target Industry Analysis Douglas Griffin provided a high-level market analysis of Virginia's wood products industry, validated ongoing state activities, and highlighted emerging trends and opportunities.

- ◆ Industry Overview and Economic Impact
 - The wood products industry contributes \$21 billion annually to Virginia's economy.
 - Exports total \$8.1 billion in Virginia timber.
 - Approximately 130,000 homes built using Virginia wood since 2020.
 - Nearly 80 localities host wood products facilities.
 - 62% of Virginia's land is forested, primarily privately owned.
 - Virginia competes effectively due to access to hardwood and softwood, strategic location, and port access.
- ◆ Industry Trends
 - **Declining Areas:**
 - Paper demand is decreasing due to digitization.
 - Furniture manufacturing is shifting overseas and toward manufactured wood.
 - **Growing/Stable Areas:**
 - Housing construction: 90% of U.S. homes are wood-framed; demand steady since pandemic.
 - Cardboard packaging demand is increasing due to e-commerce.
 - Biomass and wood pellet exports are rising significantly.
 - Engineered wood demand tracking construction and is expected to grow beyond residential uses.
- ◆ Structural Shifts
 - Fewer wood product facilities nationwide but higher productivity and consolidation.
 - Expanded use of recycled fiber in paper mills.
- ◆ Emerging Future Opportunities
 - Mass timber: Potential for major commercial/industrial market growth; regulatory barriers remain.
 - Biofuels/sustainable aviation fuel: Increasing interest; wood residuals could be feedstock.
 - Wood-plastic composites: research and development stage; applications in 3D printing, transportation, consumer products. Example: University of Maine 3D-printed house using wood-fiber polymers.
- ◆ Regulatory and Trade Issues
 - Tariffs from China, European Union (EU), Canada impacting hardwood exports.
 - EU's European Union Deforestation Regulations (EUDR) likely to increase compliance costs for U.S. exporters, especially in wood pellets.

- Concerns about land-use classification under EUDR (conversion to pasture vs. solar/development).
- Need for improved state-level coordination on data collection (GIS vs. timber output survey).
- ◆ Mass Timber Regulatory Path
 - International Building Code (IBC) 2024 updates support expanded mass timber use.
 - Virginia's DHCD must adopt IBC changes; localities must then follow.
 - State considers allowing the expedited IBC process to proceed rather than separate legislation.
 - Mass timber adoption is a "chicken-and-egg" challenge: manufacturers need code clarity before investing.
- ◆ Strategic Actions Identified
 - Attract new facilities, especially engineered wood/mass timber plants.
 - Support existing businesses with exports and workforce development.
 - Promote biomass as part of Virginia Clean Economy Act.
 - Educate local officials to adopt modern building codes enabling mass timber.
 - Increase collaboration across agencies and industry groups.

Additional information was requested about wood composites and plastic.

- Strong interest in wood-fiber composites as sustainable alternatives to plastic.
- Recognize opportunities in public education about environmental and health concerns around plastics and manufactured wood.
- Industry representatives emphasize need for trend awareness and proactive engagement, highlighting past losses due to lack of adaptation.

State Forester Lasher mentioned that DOF and Board of Forestry are available as resources to VEDP as needed.

The Board discussed how the wood products industry failed to adapt to rising trends in plastics and manufactured wood, resulting in significant market losses. Growing national attention on health and environmental impacts of plastics in homes was emphasized, noting that many consumers and architects are unaware of how much plastic-based material surrounds them. Recent outreach efforts, including conversations with experts at Harvard and referencing research on healthy buildings, arguing that education is the key to shifting public perception. Participants agreed that increasing awareness of solid wood's advantages through campaigns or hands-on demonstrations like papermaking lessons could create major opportunities for Virginia's wood products sector.

The Board discussed concerns about the EUDR and its potential impact on U.S. wood pellet exporters. They noted that the United States exported 10 million metric tons of pellets in 2024 — about 60% of Europe's imports — but research from Louisiana State University and the U.S. Forest Service suggests that future compliance costs could significantly reduce profitability, potentially leading to 5-7% production losses and about an 8% price decline by 2030. Questions were raised about when the breaking point might occur, while others highlighted confusion around how land conversion is evaluated under EUDR. Several attendees noted that EU standards appear to treat U.S. timberland the same as virgin tropical forests, despite the cyclical nature of pine and hardwood stands in states like Virginia, where many forested parcels were previously fields. Concerns were shared about inconsistent treatment of land converted to pasture versus solar or development, underscoring uncertainties the industry faces as EUDR implementation evolves.

VEDP Senior Vice President International Trade Stephanie Agee presented International Trade Programs Supporting Virginia Wood Products Companies. Agee explained how VEDP supports Virginia companies seeking to export, highlighted the impact of international trade on state economic growth, and outlined the suite of resources offered.

- ◆ Importance of International Trade to Virginia
 - Virginia exports support 316,000 jobs, representing 1 in 10 private-sector jobs.
 - Exports generate \$3.4 billion in state/local tax revenue.
 - Exports account for 10.5% of Virginia's gross state product.
 - Virginia exported \$75 billion in goods and services in 2024.
 - Services represent a large share of exports, but manufacturing (including wood products) remains critical due to its multiplier effects.
- ◆ VEDP International Trade Program Overview - VEDP supports approximately 500 Virginia companies per year, across all industries including wood products. Support is customized based on each company's experience, goals, and export readiness.
 - Core Categories of Support
 - Market research
 - International business development programs
 - Trade missions and trade shows
 - Export accelerator programs
 - Student internship programs
 - Trade training and compliance guidance
 - Collaboration with VDACS
- ◆ Export Development Programs
 - Regional Export Program (1 year)
 - For general industry companies.
 - Includes development of a basic export plan, quarterly check-ins.
 - Up to \$10,000 in financial assistance to offset export-related costs.
 - Global Defense Program (1 year)
 - Mirrors Regional Export Program but focuses on aerospace and defense sectors.
 - State Trade Expansion Program (STEP) Grant (Federal Small Business Administration (SBA) Program)
 - Supplements export funding, primarily used to offset travel costs.
 - State dollars are not used for company travel.
- ◆ Trade Show Program
 - Provides up to \$10,000 for companies attending trade shows independently.
 - Typically offsets a portion of overall costs (often \$30,000–\$40,000).
- ◆ Virginia Global Business Internship Program
 - 10-week student internships supporting company export projects.
 - Helps companies build internal capacity and identify potential hires.
- ◆ VALET Program (Flagship 2-Year Export Accelerator)

- Targeted to experienced exporters.
- Requires travel to a target market.
- Includes consulting, research, partner introductions, compliance/legal/accounting guidance, ongoing training, and peer networking.
- Caps at 50 companies at any time; 25 new companies admitted per year using a competitive invitation-only process.
- Eligibility includes: 20+ employees, \$2M+ in sales, 3+ years in business, and prior use of VEDP services.
- ◆ Market Research Services
 - Most-used service across all industries.
 - VEDP maintains:
 - Three researchers in Richmond
 - Consultants in 120 countries
 - Consultants help with:
 - Market-entry strategy
 - Competitive analysis
 - Regulatory guidance
 - Identifying prospective customers
 - Processes include scoping call, customized work plan, research execution, and delivery of a tailored report.
- ◆ Trade Missions and Trade Shows (VEDP-Led)
 - Trade Missions:
 - Groups of 8–10 companies travel together to a single country for a week.
 - Consultants develop individual meeting itineraries based on company goals.
 - Embassy briefings, cultural guidance, and staff support are included.
 - Cost per company: \$3,500.
 - Trade Shows:
 - VEDP purchases booth space at major international shows, offering subsidized access to Virginia companies.
 - Mainly used for aerospace, defense, IT, cybersecurity, and healthcare sectors.
 - Wood industry trade shows primarily supported by VDACS.
 - Upcoming Markets:
 - VEDP missions cover diverse geographies, mixing developed and emerging markets.
 - Decisions informed by client input and consultants' assessments.
- ◆ Additional Support Activities
 - Training: Webinars and in-person trainings on compliance, logistics, international marketing, social media, and trade policy.
 - Quarterly Newsletter (Beyond Virginia): Shares trade updates, tariff changes, events, partner activities.
- ◆ Tariff Monitoring and Support
 - VEDP works with Sandler, Travis & Rosenberg, a trade policy law firm, to monitor tariff developments.

- Quarterly updates and targeted webinars help companies understand changes affecting wood products and agricultural exports.
- ◆ **Staffing and Contact Structure**
 - International trade managers located throughout Virginia to maintain regional presence.
 - VEDP emphasizes proximity and “contact sport” philosophy for client engagement.
 - Contact information available on the VEDP export website (exportvirginia.org).
- ◆ **Collaboration with VDACS**
 - Strong partnership expanding under EO-5, which mandates aligned export strategy between VEDP and VDACS.
 - Joint coordination on wood products, agriculture, and food/beverage industry exports.
 - Several VEDP staff previously worked at VDACS, strengthening cross-agency familiarity and resource alignment.
- ◆ **Examples of Wood Products Company Support**
 - Assistance includes developing market-entry strategies, identifying new customers, training, and participation in trade missions.
- ◆ **Measuring Program Impact**
 - Annual client satisfaction surveys show 99% likelihood of recommending VEDP services.
 - Companies attributed \$2.3 billion in international sales to VEDP assistance last year.
 - Estimated 21,000 jobs were supported through those attributed sales.

Wood Products Industry and Export Support Efforts

- ◆ Director of Marketing and Development Rob Davenport explained how VDACS supports Virginia’s forestry and wood products industry through both international and domestic marketing, emphasizing that strong domestic performance enhances export potential. He discussed recent trade mission conversations in the UK and France, noting widespread uncertainty and mixed support among European countries regarding the EUDR, which takes effect in 2027 and may affect wood pellet exports—especially significant since nearly all Virginia pellets go to the UK. He highlighted major international opportunities for Virginia wood products, including pellets, hardwood, logs and emerging demand for sustainable aviation fuel, while also noting challenges such as shifting tariffs and differing regulatory standards across countries.
 - VDACS is expanding trade show participation, developing an Export Readiness Program, and strengthening collaboration with VEDP under EO-5. Domestically, the Virginia Grown program is adding forestry as a priority area, with plans for new marketing, trade show involvement, and branding — such as stamping exported Virginia wood with the Virginia Grown logo — to spark consumer interest and grow demand.
 - The discussion concluded with questions about big-box retail access, noting that price-driven sourcing at stores like Home Depot and Lowe’s makes entry difficult, while higher-end retailers or specialty markets may be more viable.
- ◆ Ryan Turman of Turman Group shared his long-term experience working with Virginia’s export assistance programs, beginning with the former Accessing International Markets initiative in 2006 and later expanding significantly through VEDP support. Early guidance helped them navigate challenges such as international payment methods, and over time the company grew to exporting into 30

countries, generating roughly \$500 million in sales over the past decade, about 80% of which were international, directly tied to VEDP's involvement.

- Turman praised the current administration and the strengthened collaboration between VDACS and VEDP, describing it as unprecedented and highly beneficial for the forestry sector. They highlighted major emerging opportunities in mass timber and cross-laminated timber production, citing research at Virginia Tech and strong interest from architects. He emphasized increasing consumer awareness of solid wood's health and longevity advantages over plastics and engineered materials, expressing optimism about the future of Virginia's wood products industry and the exceptional support provided by state agencies.

Wood Council Update

Utilization and Marketing Program Manager Sabina Dhungana provided an overview of the Virginia Wood Council, established in 2026.

- ◆ The council serves as a statewide strategic advisory body, bringing together stakeholders from across the forest products supply chain to address emerging industry issues, identify opportunities, and support the overall health of Virginia's forest products sector. The council meets at least three times annually and submits an annual report to the Governor's Office.
- Membership includes DOF, VDACS, VEDP, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), industry associations, primary and secondary forest product businesses, landowner groups and academic partners.
- Council objectives focus on business retention and expansion, recruitment of wood-product businesses, supporting domestic and international market development, promoting investment opportunities, strengthening sustainable forest resource management, supporting workforce development and recommending policies to support the supply chain.
- Subgroups were created to manage workload and address key issues, four subgroups were established:
 - Biomass Subgroup: Evaluating policy needs, new biomass utilization opportunities, and long-term strategies, including potential applications like sustainable aviation fuel. Next meeting scheduled for August 7.
 - Business Recruitment Subgroup: Developing strategies to recruit forestry businesses, with mass timber serving as a prototype focus. Discussions include trade show participation, funding, and marketing materials.
 - Workforce and Education Subgroup: Defining workforce needs and available educational pathways; supporting initiatives like the Virginia Lumber Cup and collaborating with Forestry Works, now housed at Virginia Tech.
 - Business Retention Subgroup: Newly created; early efforts involve compiling existing state and federal programs, technical assistance resources, and grant opportunities for mills and forestry businesses.
- Next Council meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, September 23 at Virginia Tech, followed by a Brooks Center tour.

Review of the Forestland and Urban Canopy Plan (HB309)

Policy and Legislative Analyst Nathan Thomson provided an update on the development of the Forestland and Urban Tree Canopy Conservation Plan, established through House Bill 309 (2024). The plan's purpose is to assess current forest and tree canopy conditions, identify risks, determine priority areas, set statewide goals, and identify funding opportunities.

- ◆ Legislative Background and Process
 - HB 309 passed in the 2024 General Assembly session.
 - Plan must be developed in coordination with a 30-member Technical Advisory Committee (TAC).
 - Law effective July 1, 2024; initial plan due November 30, 2026.
 - Four TAC meetings have been held; a fifth is planned for September.
- ◆ Staffing and Contractors
 - Funding allowed hiring of a GIS specialist and two contractors:
 - PlanetGeo (imagery)
 - Green Infrastructure Center (plan development)
 - Contract work concludes in September 2026, after which DOF will finalize edits.
- ◆ Data and Methodology
 - Study incorporates 12+ years of proprietary harvest data (IFRS platform), distinguishing harvest from development.
 - Utilizes statewide 60 cm high-resolution imagery — highest resolution ever used for most localities.
 - GIS web application will be created to display study findings.
- ◆ Preliminary Findings (2018–2023)
 - Tree canopy statewide has remained generally stable with a slight 1% increase.
 - Gains primarily in rural areas; losses in suburbs/exurbs along the Interstate 95 corridor.
 - Regional trends:
 - Decreases: Coastal Plain, Southern Mountains
 - Increases: Northern Mountains, Northern Piedmont, Southern Piedmont (~110,000 acres)
 - Net increase: ~237,000 acres of canopy.
 - Gains largely due to conversion of farmland/grassland back to forest.
 - Risks identified: solar development, data centers, invasive species, sea-level rise, land use pressures.
- ◆ Timeline
 - Draft reviewed internally; updated draft due August 10.
 - DOF corrections due August 24.
 - Board of Forestry will review plan at next meeting in October.
 - Final plan delivered to General Assembly November 30, following leadership/TAC review.
- ◆ Future Considerations
 - Plan must be updated every 5 years.
 - No additional funding allocated for future imagery; General Assembly action needed.

- Increasing role of AI anticipated in future change-detection capabilities.

Board members discussed how tree canopy trends vary significantly by region, noting that statewide gains can obscure losses in specific areas such as the Coastal Plain. Thomson explained that the plan includes detailed analyses by locality and Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) region and acknowledged that solar development is a major factor in Coastal Plain canopy loss, while gains in mountain regions often come from small acreages reverting to forest. Members emphasized the importance of monitoring regional declines even when statewide totals appear stable. The group also reviewed broader long-term risks — including solar and data center development, invasive species, sea-level rise, and general land-use pressures — and discussed current limitations in detecting invasive species through high-resolution imagery. Thomson noted that while tree-level detection isn't possible yet, future advances in AI may enable far more detailed monitoring within the next five years.

Forest Products Week Planning Update

Deputy State Forester Ed Zimmer provided an update on preparations for Forest Products Week, noting that the annual event highlights the economic contributions of Virginia's forestry sector, the state's third-largest industry and one that supports agriculture, tourism, craft breweries, and wineries.

- ◆ The schedule is still in development and requested suggestions for mills, harvest operations, biomass facilities, and exemplary landowner properties to feature. Events will primarily occur October 19-23, within the broader October 18-24 timeframe, with flexibility to include Saturday activities if appropriate. Communications staff will increase social media coverage of activities throughout the week.
- ◆ Senior leadership, including Secretary Fraser, Deputy Secretary Rowe, and possibly the Governor will be invited. It was emphasized that early site recommendations, preferably by the end of August, will improve the likelihood of securing participation. Biomass will be a major focus, in alignment with the recently released Comprehensive Climate Action Plan (CCAP); Wednesday of that week also coincides with National Bioenergy Day, offering an opportunity to highlight bioenergy systems.
- ◆ Board members were encouraged to share site recommendations with State Forester Lasher, Deputy State Forester Zimmer or Utilization and Marketing Program Manager Dhungana.

Action Items

None

Unfinished Business

None

New Business

- ◆ Comprehensive Climate Action Plan (CCAP) was officially released, and State Forester Lasher will share the link with Board members.

Board members discussed ongoing challenges in finding skilled logging equipment operators and explored emerging technologies that might help address labor shortages. It was noted that some operations in other states have begun using remotely operated skidders, with operators located as far away as Texas controlling equipment in Georgia.

- ◆ The group acknowledged that while remote operation still requires individuals with logging experience, it could expand the pool of available operators by reducing the physical strain associated with equipment work. Questions were raised about whether similar systems exist in Virginia and whether the industry should consider promoting or piloting such technology. Members noted potential limitations, including the need for appropriate terrain, the unchanged risk of equipment breakdowns, and the requirement for on-site personnel to handle issues such as getting machinery unstuck. Despite these challenges, the group agreed remote operation could be worth further exploration, particularly if funding opportunities become available to offset costs and support innovation in the logging workforce.

Members also discussed opportunities to expand the use and marketing of wood-based products as replacements for plastics.

- ◆ One member referenced a tour of the Covington paper mill, noting its significant production capacity for paper-based food containers such as milk cartons and fast-food packaging, and questioned whether Virginia is fully leveraging and promoting this capability. The group highlighted the recent ban on Styrofoam food containers in Virginia, effective July 1, which may increase demand for paper-based alternatives in coming months. Several participants noted broad opportunities for wood-fiber innovations, including emerging products like paper-based water bottles and other cellulose-based packaging. The group agreed that shifting consumer and regulatory trends may support stronger markets for wood products and encouraged continued discussion on how the sector can position itself.
- ◆ The conversation then turned to advanced material research, including nanocellulose as a potential plastic replacement, reinforcing agent, and packaging component. It was noted that these topics will be addressed at the next Virginia Wood Council meeting with Virginia Tech researchers.
- ◆ The Board agreed to revisit the broader plastic-replacement discussion as a future agenda item. The group recalled past presentations from Virginia Tech on related research and expressed interest in continuing collaboration.

State Forester Lasher mentioned several Industry meeting and events coming up.

- ◆ Appalachian Hardwood Manufacturers Association annual meeting (August 1-4)
- ◆ Virginia Loggers Association meeting (August 6-8)
- ◆ Virginia Forest Products Association meeting (September 11-13, The Homestead)
- ◆ American Loggers Council national meeting (September 28-October 1, Williamsburg)
- ◆ Mass Timber Plus Workshop (October 6-8, Philadelphia), highlighted as an opportunity to promote Virginia wood products to national audiences.

Schedule for the Next Meeting

- ◆ Next meeting will be sometime in October; notice will be sent out.

Meeting Adjourned

Chairperson Mulligan called for a motion to adjourn; motion was made and seconded to adjourn the July 28, 2026, meeting at 1:37 p.m. All present were in favor.

Minutes recorded by Executive Assistant Mary Weaver.