

DNREC, Chesapeake Conservancy, U.S. Navy partner to acquire property for Sussex County's Nanticoke Wildlife Area

LAUREL – Through a unique public-private partnership between the State of Delaware, the Chesapeake Conservancy and the U.S. Navy, DNREC's Division of Fish & Wildlife recently purchased 48 acres of pristine woodlands along a tributary of the Nanticoke River in Sussex County. As part of the state-owned Nanticoke Wildlife Area, the property adjoining Cod Creek features increasingly rare stands of Atlantic white cedar trees and an abundance of native wildlife, including some species of conservation concern.

This morning, U.S. Senator Chris Coons, Governor Jack Markell and DNREC Secretary David Small joined the partners at Phillips Landing, the Nanticoke Wildlife Area's public-access boat ramp, to celebrate the addition, which will be managed to protect wildlife habitat while allowing future conservation-compatible public access. The new property also expands a corridor of protected land beneath airspace used for naval flight research.



Pictured, left to right: Jeff Downing, Mt. Cuba Center; Chuck Hunt, Superintendent, NPS Chesapeake Bay Office; U.S. Senator Chris Coons (D-DE); Governor Jack Markell; Capt. Scott Starkey, Naval Air Station Patuxent River commanding officer; Kristin Thomasgard-Spence, REPI program director; DNREC Secretary David Small; Joel Dunn, Chesapeake Conservancy president and CEO; Chief Dennis Coker, Lenape Tribe. DNREC

photo by Jennifer Fitzsimmons.

The Cod Creek property was purchased for \$206,529, with \$58,000 in federal funding through the U.S. Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) program, \$68,529 in state funds from Delaware's Open Space Program and \$80,000 in private funds from the Chesapeake Conservancy, which contributed private funds for land conservation from Mt. Cuba Center.

The property is the fifth conservation acquisition in recent years to which the Chesapeake Conservancy has contributed private funds that helped leverage state money to preserve land and create public access along the Nanticoke River and the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. A key addition to this acquisition was the additional federal dollars procured through the REPI program.

"I am very grateful for the REPI program leadership and the U.S. Navy for working with the conservation community around the country and especially in Delaware," said Sen. Coons. "It's important to work together and to pool resources in order to conserve land that has strategic and biologic significance. This property in western Sussex being preserved will help conserve Delaware's precious green space on the Captain John Smith Trail, and especially the mission of Naval Air Station Patuxent River."

"Today we celebrate the addition of this key property to the beautiful Nanticoke Wildlife Area, as well as the innovative partnership behind its recent acquisition," said Governor Markell. "This public-private partnership between the State, the Navy and our private conservation partners is the first of its kind in Delaware and provides a successful model that can be applied to future land protection projects along the Nanticoke River."

"The Navy is excited to partner with Delaware to preserve land

that not only benefits natural resources, but also sustains and supports military readiness while ensuring compatible land use,” said Capt. Scott Starkey, Commanding Officer, Naval Air Station, Patuxent River. “This parcel expands on the Navy’s current partnerships in the Nanticoke region and efforts to protect a corridor of land beneath the Navy’s Atlantic Test Range and special-use airspace used by our service men and women for essential flight research, development, test, evaluation and training.”

“The Nanticoke watershed is an ecological treasure with a rich cultural and natural heritage,” said DNREC Secretary David Small. “This innovative partnership brings federal, state and private organizations and funds together to protect a key piece of the landscape for habitat, water quality, outdoor recreation and this nation’s defense mission and we look forward to building on this success.”

“This is a true win for our service members, communities, and the environment,” said REPI Program Director Kristin Thomasgard-Spence. “What excites me the most about this announcement is how this partnership is protecting the critical test missions at Naval Air Station Patuxent River, while expanding important conservation corridors, and creating new opportunities for communities to enjoy the unique natural and cultural resources in this region. This effort exemplifies what the REPI program seeks to accomplish across the country – protection of critical DoD missions through efficient public and private sector collaboration.”

The State of Delaware, the Chesapeake Conservancy and the U.S. Navy have for several years been involved in a Chesapeake Bay landscape-scale preservation initiative called the Chesapeake Conservation Partnership. Through this partnership, the three groups were able to develop a framework to leverage state, federal and private dollars against one another in order to achieve land conservation goals established in the 2014 Chesapeake Watershed Agreement.

“This partnership shows that protecting the environment and defending the country go hand-in-hand,” Chesapeake Conservancy President and CEO Joel Dunn said. “Conserving this important land near the Nanticoke River maintains the military’s critical need to practice and test aircraft and protects rare plants along the nationally-recognized Captain John Smith Chesapeake Trail. It’s a win-win situation for the Chesapeake Bay and for the nation.”

“Preservation of open space and healthy watersheds are critically important to maintaining robust, diverse communities of plants and animals. Mt. Cuba Center is pleased to support this collaborative conservation effort, because resilient ecosystems support a healthy community of humans as well,” said Mt. Cuba Center Executive Director Jeff Downing.

Located 5.5 miles west of the town of Laurel, the Cod Creek property is part of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and features several key habitats: Atlantic white cedar swamp, wild rice tidal marsh and pond-lily tidal marsh. Several Delaware Species of Greatest Conservation Need are found in the area, including bald eagles, yellow-throated warblers, pied-billed grebes and two dragonflies, the harlequin darter and the royal river cruiser, along with a rare wetland plant, Long’s bittercress.

The property is part of a larger landscape-scale conservation plan developed under the Nanticoke Initiative, spearheaded by the Chesapeake Conservancy in partnership with Delaware and Maryland’s departments of natural resources, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Nanticoke River Watershed Conservancy, Nature Conservancy and the Conservation Fund. The Initiative contributes to the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement, seeking to connect previously protected properties in an effort to create an 8,500-acre corridor of protected lands along the Nanticoke River. In addition to conserving wildlife habitat and allowing species room to adapt to climate change, the plan will

ultimately enhance low-impact outdoor recreation and eco-tourism opportunities for Delawareans and visitors in the area.

***The Chesapeake Watershed Agreement** brought six states and the District of Columbia together to achieve an environmentally and economically sustainable Chesapeake Bay Watershed, with clean water, abundant life, conserved lands, water access, a vibrant cultural heritage and a diversity of engaged citizens and stakeholders. For more information on the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement, visit www.chesapeakebay.net/chesapeakebaywatershedagreement. For more information on the Chesapeake Conservation Partnership, visit www.chesapeakeconservation.org.*

***The Chesapeake Conservancy's** mission is to strengthen the connection between people and the watershed, conserve the landscapes and special places that sustain the Chesapeake's unique natural and cultural resources, and restore landscapes, rivers, and habitats in the Chesapeake Bay region. For more information, please visit www.ChesapeakeConservancy.org.*

***The Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI)** program serves as a tool for the Department of Defense to sustain our Nation's military mission through cooperative land-use planning and integrated land protection with a variety of partners around installations and ranges. For more information, please visit www.repi.mil.*

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Vol. 46, No. 296