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VIRGINIA CHAPTER

Virginia Sierran

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Winter 2024

Gov. Youngkin's Nuclear Dream: A nightmare for Virginia's coalfield communities (Spoiler alert: Maybe for you, too)

by Rees Shearer and Sharon Fisher



Sheila Shell, small business owner in Wise County, with a sign from her store window in protest of small modular nuclear reactors (photo courtesy of Sharon Fisher).

Imagine: You are watching the 6 o'clock local news. Virginia's governor is announcing appropriation of nearly a quarter of your county to build nuclear reactors, reprocess high-level nuclear waste, inject carbon into the ground, burn fossil fuels to generate hydrogen and build data centers on 65,000 acres. "What the hell is going on?" you say to your significant other. "I didn't hear the board of supervisors or the zoning board permitting this or about any public hearing!"

Gov. Glenn Youngkin is employing this autocratic approach in Wise County, Vir-

ginia. On November 1, 2023, the governor announced a deal to establish his energy dominion on disturbed mine land, dubbed "Data Center Ridge" by the promoters. When Youngkin released his administration's "all of the above" Virginia Energy Plan in October 2022, he announced his "moonshot" to build small modular reactors, or SMRs, in Virginia's coalfield region.

Youngkin came to the coalfields to make his announcement without notifying the public or even local government officials. The press was notified to meet

at a parking lot in Norton, where they would be bused to an undisclosed location. The attendees forming a backdrop for the photo op were by invitation only and included Dominion Energy allies Del. Terry Kilgore of Gate City, 9th District Congressman Morgan Griffith and former Virginia governor George Allen.

Local and regional environmental groups immediately called out the lack of transparency and public involvement and appealed for more than a year for disclosure and public involvement. Responses ranging from the executive director of Planning District 1 to the executive director of the Virginia Nuclear Energy Consortium were that it was not time for public involvement.

A coalition of five local and regional organizations—the Clinch Coalition, Alliance for Appalachia, Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, Appalachian Peace Education Center and Virginia Organizing-Wise County Chapter—are leading the inquiry and resistance to the targeting of the coalfield region for the benefit of politicians and special industry interests promoting nuclear power, hydrogen production and waste reprocessing.

The five groups adopted a white paper detailing concerns about high-level nuclear waste storage and reprocessing, nuclear and

geological safety issues and employment and climate impacts along with other aspects of the Data Ridge project. This coalition is working with the Virginia Chapter Sierra Club to monitor energy legislation, especially as it may relate to regulating data centers, and with Appalachian Voices about placing potentially dangerous new technologies on previously mined land and the impact on environmental justice communities ravaged by 140 years of coal and timber extraction on economically distressed communities.

The nuclear industry and its enabling politicians have a history of placing citizens at risk and promising more than they deliver. Gov. Youngkin's SMR proposal not only follows in that tradition but fails to meet his own three criteria he set for his Virginia Energy Plan because of the following factors:

- SMRs cannot be reliable. They can't reliably be built and brought on line in a predictable and timely fashion to generate base-load power or affect climate change.
- SMRs cannot be affordable. Nuclear energy is the most expensive way to generate commercial electric power and customers pay the resulting cost.
- SMRs cannot be clean.

See Nuclear power on page 7.

From the chair

by Ralph Grove



Happy New Year everyone! I hope you've enjoyed the holiday season and that you have a great year in 2024. I spent some time in Kentucky, as usual, visiting family and my old stomping grounds. It's always amazing to see how much things

have changed in a year—the things that we don't notice on a day-to-day basis.

Our chapter is starting the year with two new elected at-large members on the chapter executive committee. Richard Groover, from Mechanicsville, is a retired community college dean and currently an adjunct professor at Randolph Macon College and George Mason University. Dr. Groover is the author of the *Environmental Almanac of Virginia, Second Edition*, published in 2017, and is on the board of trustees for the Science Museum of Virginia and the Virginia Academy of Science.

Ofelia Wattle, from Norfolk, is a licensed clinical social worker for the practice of

individual, family, marriage and group therapy. She retired from the City of Virginia Beach Department of Human Services and was adjunct faculty in the graduate school of social work at Norfolk State University. She is also active in several local political, ethnic, religious and social justice groups and serves on the board of directors of the League of Women Voters of South Hampton Roads. We also welcome back Tiffany Garner of Woodbridge for another term on the ExCom and Judy Gayer of McClean, who will transition from being a group delegate to an at-large member.

This is my last column as ExCom chair, after serving

in the position for two years. At our January meeting, that role will be taken over by Judy Gayer, currently vice-chair. Judy has been working with me and Chapter Director Connor Kish over the last month on making the transition in ExCom leadership. I feel very happy to leave the ExCom and chapter leadership in the very capable hands of Judy and Connor.

For my part, I will continue to serve on the ExCom in 2024 as an at-large member and will continue in the role of chapter outings chair.

Hope to see you on the trail sometime!

Ralph Grove is the executive committee chair of the Virginia Chapter.

No new gas: The Chesterfield Energy Reliability Project

by Ann Creasy

Dominion is proposing a gas-fired power plant in Chesterfield County (just outside of Richmond). Dominion is calling this project the Chesterfield Energy Reliability Center. Whether you look at its fluctuating price, the inability to get it back on line quickly after a natural disaster or its destabilizing effects on the climate, it be-

comes evident that fracked gas is not reliable or consistent as a source of energy.

The location for the proposed gas-fired plant is within a two-mile radius of homes where people have long been harmed by existing industrial development and pollution. People living in Chesterfield are worried about another major pollu-

tion source in the same location as the closed coal plant where large piles of toxic coal ash still remain. Dominion's proposal for a new, additional polluting project in this community only continues and worsens the condition of environmental injustice. All gas plants leak methane and numerous other air toxins that can cause cancer,

respiratory illness and other conditions.

Virginians will bear the costs and consequences of this gas-fired power plant in the form of higher electricity bills, negative health impacts and more severe climate change from Dominion's use of fossil fuel. Dominion is *See Chesterfield gas plant on page 4.*

Virginia Sierran

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<https://sierraclub.org/virginia>

The Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club is over 20,000 members strong. We are your friends and neighbors working to build healthy, livable communities and to conserve and protect our climate and environment. The Virginia Chapter is part of the national Sierra Club, the nation's largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization.

Information about our staff, executive committee and environmental action chairs can be found on the Virginia Chapter website under "About."

Virginia Sierran Editor: Sevim Kalyoncu, editorvirginiasieran@gmail.com

The editor welcomes editorial contributions, photographs and art work. Submissions should pertain to Virginia's environment and/or climate change. Email the editor with questions on submissions.

Please contact member.care@sierraclub.org for membership and mailing issues and address.changes@sierraclub.org to change your mailing address.

2023 Volunteer Appreciation Awards

by Ralph Grove

Each year, the Virginia Chapter recognizes contributions made by some of our many committed and talented volunteers. Award nominations for 2023 were solicited in the fall and announcements made in December. Awards are given in two categories. The Volunteer Appreciation Award recognizes outstanding service at the group or chapter level; the Glen Besa Lifetime Achievement Award, named for our former chapter director, recognizes long-term

service to the Virginia Chapter in multiple leadership roles.

2023 Volunteer Appreciation Award Recipients:

- Ann Bennett, for leadership in organizing a response to the growing environmental risk associated with the growth of data centers throughout the state.

- Victoria Gallaway, for work in leadership of the Rappahannock Group and helping to carry out its mission.

- Zoe Hanrahan, for work in leadership of the Rappahannock Group and helping to carry out its mission.

- Natalie Loeffler, for work in leadership of the Rappahannock Group and helping to carry out its mission.

- Bill Penniman, for efforts to strengthen Virginia's Statewide Energy Code and for participation in numerous other efforts over several years related to energy efficiency.

vice to the Chapter through efforts in multiple roles, for willingness to take on the jobs that need doing, for the positive energy brought to the organization and for the inspiration given to others.

Please join me in congratulating these award winners and in thanking all of the volunteers who have contributed to the success of the Virginia Chapter this year.

2023 Glen Besa Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient: Susan Stillman, for long-term and ongoing ser-

Ralph Grove is the executive committee chair of the Virginia Chapter.

Ruth Amundsen wins Virginia Renewable Energy Alliance Leadership Award

by Eileen Woll



Congratulations to Ruth Amundsen for winning the Virginia Renewable Energy Alliance annual Leadership Award.

Ruth Amundsen has been an indispensable asset in the renewable energy and environmental realm. She is responsible for more than \$2 million of equitable solar installations in Virginia and has advised others across the nation on how to repeat her successes.

In 2018, Ruth led a group of parents to finance a \$1 million solar array system for Norfolk Academy, the oldest

school in America. In 2019, Ruth founded the Norfolk Solar Qualified Opportunity Zone Fund, focusing on installing solar in low-income areas while simultaneously offering job training to low-income residents. The fund was a first of its kind both nationally and locally. The fund installed the first and, to date, only residential solar projects in Virginia to qualify for low-income PPAs.

The success of the fund led to her founding Norfolk Solar, LLC and Sunspots to continue the work of utilizing private wealth to install solar in frontline communities in Virginia.

For many years, she has led the organizing of several Solar Home Tours in Hampton Roads, and for more than a decade, she has led efforts to educate numerous communities on solar finance models.

Eileen Woll is the offshore energy program director of the Virginia Chapter.

Membership chair needed!

The Sierra Club Virginia Chapter is looking for a volunteer membership chair to lead efforts across the Chapter to recruit, welcome and engage new members in a way that advances the Chapter's mission.

RESPONSIBILITIES:

- Meet with group membership chairs regularly to share strategies for recruiting, welcoming and engaging new members
- Promote awareness of Sierra Club resources available to support effective member recruitment and retention
- Work with volunteers, staff and partner organizations as needed to advance organizational membership and recruitment goals
- Report to the Chapter ExCom on membership figures and changes

DESIRED SKILLS/ABILITIES:

- Enjoy meeting new people and participating in social events
- Interact and communicate effectively with people from diverse backgrounds
- Good teamwork skills
- Well-organized
- Sierra Club member in good standing with primary residence in Virginia

TIME COMMITMENT: About 2-5 hours per week

Interested? Please contact Ralph Grove (rfgrove@icloud.com) for more information.

Chesterfield gas plant continued from page 2

aiming to pass these costs and consequences on to us in order to turn a profit. Dominion itself has cited that the primary reason for a new gas power plant is to support increased energy demand linked to data center growth in Virginia. The cost of satisfying energy demand growth due specifically to data centers should not be passed on to Virginians.

We are currently waiting for Dominion to request a conditional use permit from the Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors. The company will also need an air permit from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality and approval from the State Corporation Commission.

Friends of Chesterfield, a grassroots group that has formed in Chesterfield County, is working tirelessly to communicate to their board of supervisors about their concerns related to this plant as they wait for Dominion to file the permit application. Since the summer of 2023, community members and partner groups such as the NAACP, Chesapeake Climate Action Network, Appalachian Voices, Liberal Women of Chesterfield County, League of Conservation Voters and Virginia Organizing have been supporting action and education on the proposed gas plant.

Ann Creasy is the Hampton Roads field director of the Virginia Chapter.



Community members and advocates rally against Dominion's proposed Chesterfield Energy Reliability Center on June 27, 2023 (photo courtesy of Victoria Higgins of Chesapeake Climate Action Network).

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- Jan 20-21 ... Harrisonburg/Staunton area, VA**
- Jan 27-28 ... Farmville, VA**
- Jan 27-28 ... Richmond, VA**
- Feb 24-25 ... Winchester, VA**
- Mar 2-3 ... Charlottesville, VA**
- Mar 9-10 ... Lexington, VA**
- Mar 16-17 ... Washington, DC area**
- Apr 6-7 ... Charlottesville, VA**
- Apr 20-21 ... Blacksburg, VA**
- May 4-5 ... Richmond, VA**

Brought to you by Matthew Rosefsky, Geo Medic, street medic, SOLO Instructor-Trainer, Sierra Club Outings leader and volunteer strategist for Sierra Club National "Outdoors for All" campaign. See <https://solowfa.com> for more information and online registration.

Group Directory

Groups are organized to conduct the work of Sierra Club in local areas, cities and towns. The information listed below is for the chair of each group. Information regarding groups' geographical area can be found on our website under Find a Group Near You.

Chesapeake Bay:

John Luker
757-337-4092
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Sierra Club Potomac Region Outings (SCPRO):

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SCPRO and Great Falls Group team up to highlight the threat of data centers to Manassas Battlefield Park

by Gary Kosciusko and Ann Bennett



Outing participants gathered at Manassas National Battlefield Park on December 3, 2023 (photo courtesy of Gary Kosciusko).

Avid readers of the Virginia Sierran may remember a number of articles over the past years describing the many challenges that unconstrained data center development poses for Virginia as we strive for a sustainable future in the face of climate change. Buoyed by its success in Loudoun County and backed by the governor, the data center industry is now hoping to expand into other Virginia counties as far south as Surry and Wise and even into nearby Maryland counties. Counties are competing with one another for what appears to them to be another source of quick revenue. Of course, the impact of industry influence on this competition cannot be minimized.

One of the most recent cases is in Prince William County, where several companies have proposed data centers for a rural zone of 2100+ acres adjacent to Manassas National Battlefield Park. These huge centers pose the greatest threat to the park since Walt Disney Enterprises proposed to build a theme park nearby in the 1990s and was thwarted in doing so. If fully devel-

oped, this complex, dubbed the Prince William Digital Gateway, or PWDG, would be the largest in the world at more than 27 million square feet, or larger than 4 Pentagons.

Already, about 70% of the world's internet traffic flows through northern Virginia. Between October 2022 and this past December, Sierra Club Potomac Region Outings and Great Falls Group partnered on three outings (two of which were held in light rain) to highlight the threats that this particular complex poses to the park and to the surrounding region. Unfortunately, after an accelerated review process, in spite of widespread opposition from the public and environmental groups, rezonings for the PWDG were approved four to three by the largely lame-duck Prince William County Board of County Supervisors.

The PWDG will require multiple high voltage transmission lines and electrical substations, most of which have yet to be built. Even so, the data centers will need diesel generators to make up for any insufficient elec-

tric power or any power outages. These infrastructure costs will be mostly borne by ratepayers as opposed to the companies themselves, which happen to be some of the most profitable in the world today. Even if the data centers could be visually hidden or camouflaged (doubtful), the noise from such diesel generators could not be masked.

Acceleration of computing and cooling demands from artificial intelligence, cryptocurrency, online gaming and other rapidly changing technologies will require increasingly more energy and will exacerbate current demands on the electric grid. The data center industry in Virginia achieved a peak load of almost 2.8 gigawatts in 2022 and is projected to grow to 13GW by 2038. This certainly translates into an enormous reliance on fossil fuels for the necessary power generation, much of which will need to come from outside Virginia. And due to the number of diesel generators on site, fuel tanks will accompany them, with the attendant risk of fuel spills into the watershed that ul-

timately feeds into the Occoquan Reservoir, a source of drinking water for Prince William and southern Fairfax counties as well as the city of Alexandria.

The Sierra Club is not opposed to data centers per se as they are necessary for our 21st century lifestyle. What the Club opposes is the current, largely unconstrained development of these centers, which are on track to consume energy and water resources in a way we have not seen before. What we want is a more thoughtful and deliberate planning process that takes all factors into account, including following necessary environmental protections and meeting Virginia's carbon emission goals.

Let's hope this message takes root in the minds of our local, state and national political leaders in 2024. You are certainly welcome to remind them!

Gary Kosciusko is the Sierra Club Potomac Region Outings chair and Ann Bennett is the data center issue chair of the Virginia Chapter.

Help taxpayers and electricity ratepayers stop paying the data center expansion bill

by Rees Shearer and Sharon Fisher

Sierrans, urge your General Assembly representatives to adopt legislative policies, proposed by Sierra Club's Ivy Main and Ann Bennett, that place the expense back on data centers for their own increased electric power demand and direct them to use renewable energy as much as is currently feasible.

Here's why: Data centers receive a QUINTUPLE dip of subsidies from Virginians.

- Virginia offers an exemption from state retail sales and use tax for qualifying computer equipment purchased by data centers that meet statutory investment and employment requirements. In distressed areas ("a locality with annual

unemployment and poverty rates that were greater than the state average"), Virginia citizens must make up the difference in state revenues.

- Federal subsidies: The Department of Energy already pitched in over \$1 billion to the failed NuScale small modular nuclear reactor project, and the Inflation Reduction Act, passed last year, includes \$10 billion to fund a \$30/MWh (\$.03/kWh) credit for nuclear power plants. U.S. citizens must compensate for the tax loss and carry the insurance risk. At baseline, the nuclear industry already costs federal taxpayers, ratepayers and communities hundreds of billions of dollars in hidden subsidies, insurance, decommissioning and mitigation costs. Federal subsidies alone, up to 2017, topped \$100 billion, with more in the pipeline.

- Utility rates: As the overall economy is getting more efficient, new data center electricity demand is nearly the only sector driving up electric utility load, but the cost of new generation facilities to meet that demand (SMRs or any new generation source) is borne by all Virginia utility ratepayers, even if SMRs never are completed or operate well below capacity. Virginia taxpayers and utility ratepayers subsidize the data center industry by paying for the power generation increase that the data centers demand.

- Large consumers, like data centers which consume extraordinary amounts of power, pay much less per kWh of electricity than residential customers. Virginia's low business electric rates

are second only to North Dakota's (where cheap wind is plentiful) for being the cheapest business rates in the nation. Residential rates in Virginia are 70% higher than business rates. At high electricity consumption, data centers force utilities to use less efficient generating facilities, even keeping open obsolete facilities.

- Many Virginia counties lower their property tax rates for an exclusive data center benefit. Regional industry promoters are encouraging Virginia counties to lower their property tax rates for data centers.

"The underlying issue is that the state and local governments provide incentives such as tax breaks, land, infrastructure, and services, usually in a competitive bidding process with other governments trying to land the data center," according to Todd Cherry, Center for Economic Research and Policy Analysis at Appalachian State University. "The incentive packages can be quite outlandish—far exceeding any reasonable economic justification. This is a form of what we call 'the winner's curse.' When governments engage in a competitive bidding process over an uncertain benefit, the one that wins is the one that overestimates the benefit. This kind of competitive bidding to attract companies often becomes more of a political game than an economic development strategy."

Rees Shearer and Sharon Fisher are nuclear co-chairs of the Virginia Chapter.

SMRs: Unreliable, unaffordable, dirty, dangerous

by Rees Shearer and Sharon Fisher

Nuclear reliability is a victim of cost: NuScale, the only small modular reactor, or SMR, close to design approval anywhere in the U.S., was canceled on November 8, 2023, because of soaring costs. The costs of the latest nuclear projects to come online (seven years late and among the few since the Three Mile Island meltdown), Georgia Power's Vogtle Units 3 and 4, exceeded cost projections by 120%. Competition with cheaper renewable power alternatives will result in future project cancellations. Utilities want to win either way, scooping up front-end federal and state subsidies, then forcing ratepayers to take the risks and pay even if a nuclear plant is never completed.

Dirty: A recent Stanford University study concluded "small modular reactors may produce a disproportionately larger amount of nuclear waste than bigger nuclear plants." Let's be clear: Plutonium 239, the most lethal element in the witch's brew of high-level waste radionuclides, has a half-life of 24,000 years. There is no permanent storage solution. Just because we have stored nuclear waste at reactor sites for 70 years doesn't mean human beings can or should be expected to do so for 250,000 years—a horrifying legacy! Youngkin's proposal to reprocess the waste on site has never been done before and is a reckless venture fraught with accident, nuclear proliferation and terrorist risks.

Dangerous: Nuclear safety is being compromised by regulatory capture of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The nuclear industry sees SMRs as its ticket to a revitalized, subsidized, streamlined NRC regulation future. The bipartisan 2023 ADVANCE Act, passed by the Senate in late July 2023, greases the wheels for "regulatory capture" of the NRC by utilities and industry supporters.

Learn more at vasierra.club/SMnR.Statement.12.23.pdf

Nuclear power continued from page 1

They produce high- and low-level radioactive waste along with risks associated with accidental radioactive releases, transportation and storage.

No commercial SMR has been successfully built in the nation. “The project meant to debut small modular reactors, the technology the nuclear energy industry hopes will spur a renaissance of atomic power construction, collapsed on November 8th, amid mounting financial troubles,” notes Alexander C. Kaufman in the November 8, 2023 HuffPost article, *The U.S. Project Meant To Debut Revolutionary Nuclear Reactors Just Fell Apart*. Similarly, no on-site reprocessing of high-level commercial nuclear waste (as the governor proposes) has ever been attempted.

Gov. Youngkin wants to encourage state and local government-subsidized data centers to locate in econom-

ically distressed southwest Virginia, partly because data centers have become controversial elsewhere in Virginia. Unfortunately, none of the Data Ridge projects offer hope of substantial local employment.

SMRs are a climate change shell game. Sierra Club Executive Director Ben Jealous published a June 12 op-ed, *Nuclear power is no silver bullet to wean us from fossil fuels*. He picks up the baton from the Sierra Club’s Iowa Chapter resolution, endorsed by the Virginia Chapter, demythologizing proponents’ claims that SMRs are a climate solution.

Nuclear power in 10-20 years is no realistic climate change solution. We must be adding zero-carbon power generating solutions now, not in 10-20 years, if we plan to avoid catastrophic climate change. SMR proposals suck support and state financing away from local and

regional renewable energy initiatives to build solar farms on unreclaimed mining sites instead of forest and farmland and evaporate resources and support from pursuit of subsidies designed to create new battery storage development.

If you would like more information about these groups’ efforts and want to

learn how contacting your General Assembly member can help, contact us at rrshearer@gmail.com and wvfisher48@gmail.com

Read the five-organization white paper at the SMnR statement link on page 6.

Rees Shearer and Sharon Fisher are nuclear co-chairs of the Virginia Chapter.



Sharon Fisher addressing supporters at a planning dinner preceding the VA Energy session (photo courtesy of Lauren Albrecht).

Virginia Chapter email lists

Virginia Climate Movement: Join this list of people active in the Virginia climate movement to receive and send emails on climate-related news, events, webinars and actions going on across the state. *Monthly call on the fourth Tuesday at 12 p.m. and 7 p.m.* **Contact Mary-Stuart Torbeck at mary-stuart.torbeck@sierraclub.org**

Virginia Environmental Justice: Join this list to work towards achieving environmental justice in Virginia. Our purpose is to identify environmental justice communities across the state, to develop EJ leadership, to provide room at the table for these organizations in statewide policy discussions and to share resources. *Monthly call on the second Wednesday at 11 a.m. and the second Thursday at 5:30 p.m.* **Contact Gustavo Angeles at gustavo.angeles@sierraclub.org**

Sierra Club Virginia Chapter Equity, Inclusion and Justice: This space is for asking questions, voicing concerns and sharing ideas as we move forward in our work to create a more equitable environment and chapter. **Contact Gustavo Angeles at gustavo.angeles@sierraclub.org**

Hampton Roads: Join this list to get updates about actions, events and ways to get involved in Hampton Roads. **Contact Ann Creasy at Ann.Creasy@sierraclub.org** or visit <https://vasierra.club/hr>

Richmond: Join this list to get updates about actions, events and ways to get involved in the Richmond metropolitan area. **Contact Tim Cywinski at tim.cywinski@sierraclub.org** or visit <https://vasierra.club/rva>

Northern Virginia: Join this list to get updates about actions, events and ways to get involved in Northern Virginia. **Contact Cheri Conca at cheri.conca@sierraclub.org** or visit <https://vasierra.club/nova>

Coal dust risks from open-top trains

by Hunter Noffsinger

In Hampton Roads, across the state and across the country, uncovered coal is transported by train through communities every single day. For many, it is so familiar we may not even stop to think about the effects of coal on the health of our communities, waterways and environment. But as those uncovered coal trains barrel their way across the country, they leave a trail of harm in the form of coal dust.

Coal dust from uncovered coal trains contains a highly toxic cocktail of chemicals and metals including arsenic, cadmium, chromium and mercury. Many of these pollutants are made of tiny particles so small they can pass through the lungs and into the bloodstream, leading to serious and long-term impacts. Coal dust exposure can increase the risk of bronchitis, asthma, emphysema, heart disease, stroke, kidney disease, pneumonia

and even infant mortality and premature death. Long-term exposure to coal dust can also result in black lung disease, a debilitating condition that scars the lungs, making it difficult to breathe.

Because of decades of racism and discriminatory policies, polluting industries and transportation infrastructure such as highways and railways are disproportionately located in communities of color and low-income communities. People of color, including Black, Hispanic and Asian people, have a higher risk of premature death from particle pollution than white people, and unregulated coal train pollution exacerbates existing environmental and social inequalities.

Not only does coal dust pollution harm our human health, it pollutes our waterways by introducing toxic pollutants to surface waters that can build up in fish and other aquatic wildlife, leading

to behavior changes, stunted growth, decreased reproduction and many other environmental issues. Dust from coal trains can cover seagrasses and become lodged in the gills of fish and invertebrates, making it hard for them to breathe. Coal dust can also settle in rivers and streams, clouding otherwise clear waters and harming aquatic life.

With coal exports growing, the amount of coal transported by trains is increasing, making protections against coal dust pollution more important than ever. While coal trains are common throughout the country, coal dust from uncovered rail cars in the U.S. is largely unregulated. That's why in the fall of 2023, the Sierra Club joined together with 15 other groups to submit a petition to the EPA requesting immediate action to stop pollution from open-top coal cars throughout the United States

under the Clean Water Act.

The EPA has a responsibility to do its job and put an end to the unlawful discharges of coal dust and require coal train operators to obtain and adhere to a Nationwide General National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Permit for Discharges of Coal from Uncovered Railcars. This program involves giving out permits that allow or restrict the discharge of pollutants from these specific sources.

You can take action today by contacting the EPA and asking for more protections against coal dust pollution in your community at [sc.org/coal](https://www.epa.gov/sc.org/coal)

Hunter Noffsinger is the Hampton Roads community outreach coordinator of the Virginia Chapter.

Maximizing offshore wind

by Eileen Woll

To confront the climate crisis, we must maximize offshore wind development. Not only can offshore wind deliver 30% of our 100% clean energy goals, but it can do so while delivering tens of thousands of family-supporting jobs to communities that need it most.

The federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, or BOEM, has released a proposed sale notice for the Central Atlantic. One of the areas under consideration for lease sale is an area off Virginia that is adjacent to our current Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind project. Unfortunately, BOEM excluded

additional areas off Maryland and North Carolina. If we are to satisfy our clean energy goals, confront the climate crisis head on and forge forward with a game-changing frontier clean energy industry that provides maximum benefits to coastal communities, that must be remedied.

We applaud the Biden administration's efforts to build 30 gigawatts of offshore wind by 2030, and the lease areas proposed in the Central Atlantic go a long way towards satisfying that "30 by 30" goal and fulfilling the clean energy goals for each of the states in the region. We are thrilled that

BOEM has added lease areas off Virginia's coast but are concerned about exclusions of areas off the coasts off Maryland and especially North Carolina.

The mid-Atlantic area needs nothing hampering its establishment as an industry offshore wind hub. This frontier industry needs the certainty stemming from a robust pipeline of projects lined up. This is especially important right now considering the economic challenges offshore wind developers are currently facing.

We need to urge BOEM to reconsider exclusion of lease areas off Maryland and

North Carolina and immediately initiate the process whereby those areas are on track for a 2025 lease sale. The public comment period ends February 12, 2024.

Please visit vasierra.club/moreOSWnow to send a message to BOEM urging the maximization of mid-Atlantic offshore wind development. Our clean energy future depends on it.

Eileen Woll is the offshore energy program director of the Virginia Chapter.

Three actions you can take to help your school district switch to clean, electric buses

by Cheri Conca

What's the largest public transportation system in the country? School buses! That's why transitioning from fossil fuel buses to battery electric models can make an impactful dent in greenhouse gas emissions. School bus purchase decisions are made at the local level, so your advocacy for clean, electric school buses can make the difference between whether your community remains in the fossil fuel dark ages or steps up to a cleaner, healthier and more economical fleet.

Of Virginia's approximately 16,000 school buses, only about 226 of them are electric. We have a long way to go. Because of federal funding, now is the perfect time for school districts to get great deals on buses and charging infrastructure. The applications can be daunting though, especially for smaller, less affluent districts. Here's how you can help:

- Gather information. Find out if your school district has a bus electrification plan or a sustainability plan.



If not, does the school district adhere to the local government's resilience, sustainability or climate plan? Having a written plan in place will help with the funding application process.

Gather facts about the fleet: How many total buses? Is there funding dedicated to a transition to electric buses? What is the bus replacement schedule and purchasing plan? Is the district willing to switch already planned future diesel bus purchases to electric bus purchases?

Find out what your district needs in order to ap-

ply for funding. Does staff need help with grant writing or developing an electrification plan? What questions do they need answered? Are there concerns about charging, maintenance, route lengths or bus performance?

- Contact your school board members, superintendent, transportation staff and local elected officials. Not sure who to contact? Go to doe.virginia.gov and search for "Virginia public school division staff" to access Virginia Department of Education's online directory, then click on your school district to see contact information for the superintendent. You can also search for "Transportation" staff, such as a transportation director or coordinator. If your school district does not have dedicated transportation staff, look for the top financial staffer, such as the director of finance or operations. Do an internet search to find your school board members' contact information as well as listings of upcoming school board meetings and public input opportunities.

You can ask school board members and staff to adopt a resolution establishing the goal of achieving 100%

clean transportation by 2030 or 2035, establish an electric bus pilot program or set a target date to stop purchasing fossil fuel buses.

- Write a letter to the editor. Include reasons to switch to electric buses, such as cleaner air, better respiratory health and lower cost of ownership in the long run. Ask readers to speak at the next school board meeting and urge them to contact school board members, the superintendent and transportation staff.

With an abundance of federal funding available for clean transportation, this is a great time for school districts to switch to clean, battery electric school buses. The current EPA Clean School Bus Rebate Program is taking applications through January 31, 2024. The application for this round of funding is much simpler than the previous grant program application. Funds can be used for new electric school buses and behind-the-meter infrastructure such as electric panels, charging stations, battery energy storage systems and renewable on-site power generation such as solar panels.

Electric school bus advocates can find more information and resources at the Alliance for Electric School Buses, electricschoolbuses4kids.org, of which Sierra Club is a member.

Virginia Chapter's Decarbonization Plan for Virginia

by Cheri Conca

The Chapter outlines its vision for how Virginia can achieve a net-zero emissions future in its latest publication, Decarbonization Plan for Virginia.

The paper serves as an informative guideline for state legislators as they proceed through the 2024 General Assembly legislative session, featuring topics such as shifting electricity generation from fossil fuels to zero-carbon renewable energy, making buildings more energy efficient and reforming Virginia's transportation system to reduce tailpipe pollution. You can read the paper here: vasierra.club/DecarbonizationPlan.pdf

Cheri Conca is the transportation and SMART growth program manager of the Virginia Chapter.

Caring for the land: Increased timber production at odds with old growth and wildlands protection

by Sherman Bamford



Ice on Dismal Creek (photo courtesy of Sherman Bamford).

The Forest Service's motto is "Caring for the Land and Serving the People." In an April 2022 executive order, President Joe Biden pledged to "identify, inventory, and protect" old growth forests on our public lands. On December 18, the federal government took a step towards fulfilling that promise by proposing to amend all 128 national forest plans across the country to require some measure of protection for old growth forests. Sierra Club Executive Director Ben Jealous called this a "groundbreaking step" and urged Biden "to make sure it's not the last. We need to keep our old growth trees standing, [and] protect our

mature forests from threats."

Comments on the proposal can be submitted, with a February 2, 2024 receipt date, to vasierra.club/USDAcomments or Director, Ecosystem Management Coordination, 201 14th Street, SW, Mailstop 1108, Washington, DC 20250-1124.

While the proposal marks the first time all national forests nationwide would have to protect old growth for its own sake, the proposal would explicitly allow some logging in old growth forests as long as these tracts retain the somewhat limited structural thresholds of the Southern Region's definition of old growth. This could in fact

sanction old growth logging. The proposal also does very little to protect mature forest, including mature forest on the verge of becoming old growth and mature forest adjacent to old growth.

Our forests were decimated by logging at the turn of the 20th century, and old growth forest is exceedingly rare on the landscape. According to the Southern Region's old growth guidance, "old growth forests are rare or largely absent in the southeastern forests of the United States. Existing old growth communities may represent around 0.5%... of the total forest acreage." This is all the more reason to fully protect old growth and surrounding mature forests from logging.

At the same time, there are dangerous cross-winds, as the agency promotes higher and higher levels of timber cutting. A Fiscal Year 2022 Forest Service memo on timber targets said, "The Forest Service sold 2.8 billion board feet (BBF) of timber in fiscal year (FY) 2021. Over the past five years, the agency has sold an average of 3.08 BBF annually, higher than any period in the previous few decades.... In the near term, we anticipate the Pacific Northwest, Eastern, and Southern Regions should have the greatest increase in total timber volume sold." Recent legislation and streamlined regulations have allowed this to happen.

Consequently, in Virginia's George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, we have recently seen more and more timber sales impacting old growth, key watersheds and wildlands.

A sampler includes the following:

- Dunlap Creek: 1,178 acres of logging and 17 miles of logging skid trails are proposed in and near a Virginia Natural Heritage site in Alleghany County "covering 3,600 acres [that is] one of the largest known contiguous occurrences of Appalachian oak forest in old-growth condition in Virginia and perhaps in all of the central Appalachians." Even if logging were proposed outside of actual old growth tracts, the indirect impacts could be significant. Trout streams could be impacted as well. Another part of the project is in or near the 4,043-acre Slaty Mountain Virginia mountain treasure area.

- Dismal Creek: 400 acres of logging was approved in the 7,000-acre Dismal Creek mountain treasure area west of Blacksburg. Downstream from the project is an aquatic species-related conservation site given an "outstanding" biodiversity significance ranking by Virginia Natural Heritage.

- Devils Hens Nest: 2,600 acres of logging is proposed in this site south of Big Stone Gap. The Nature Conservancy ranks this part of the Jefferson National Forest and nearby Clinch River watershed as one of the biodiversity hotspots of the Lower 48 states. There are three significant old growth tracts on two sides of the project and nearby, (1) an old growth tract in Laurel Fork watershed growth forest that is described as "unusual and significant because of its

See Old growth forests on page 12.

Electrifying Virginia's future: The technical integration of HEEHRA and HOMES for energy efficiency

by McKenna Dunbar

As Virginia forges ahead in its journey toward a sustainable future, the integration of two pivotal legislative acts, the High-Efficiency Electric Home Rebate Act, or HEEHRA, and the Home Owner Managing Energy Savings, or HOMES, stands as a cornerstone in this transformation. Both HEEHRA and HOMES are instrumental in redefining the state's approach to energy consumption, household economics and environmental stewardship, particularly in the context of developing a clean energy economy.

HEEHRA offers a significant breakthrough, especially for low- and moderate-income households in Virginia. This act provides point-of-sale rebates for electrifying homes, thereby encouraging a shift from fossil-fuel-based appliances to more energy-efficient electric alternatives, such as heat pump HVAC systems, electric stoves and heat pump water heaters. HEEHRA addresses financial barriers by covering up to 100% of electrification costs for low-income families and up to 50% for moderate-income families, making this transition more accessible and equitable.

The HOMES Act plays a complementary role. It incentivizes homeowners to undertake energy-efficient improvements in their homes. HOMES focuses on broader energy-saving measures, providing financial support for upgrades that enhance overall home energy efficiency. This could include insulation improvements, window replacements and

other modifications that contribute to a home's energy conservation. These upgrades not only reduce energy consumption but also significantly lower utility bills for households, further easing the financial burden on Virginia's residents.

The impact of HEEHRA and HOMES extends beyond individual households. By transitioning more homes to efficient electric appliances and improving overall energy efficiency, these acts collectively contribute to reducing Virginia's reliance on fossil fuels. This shift is crucial for environmental health, as it directly correlates with a reduction in carbon emissions and fosters better air quality. Moreover, the state-wide push towards home electrification and energy efficiency under these acts is a key driver in combating climate change and propelling Virginia towards its clean energy goals.

The successful implementation of HEEHRA and HOMES, however, hinges on overcoming certain challenges. Coordination among state agencies, utility companies and consumers is paramount. Virginia's state energy offices are tasked with the critical responsibility of designing rebate and incentive programs that not only are accessible but also effectively meet the intended objectives of these acts. Ensuring that the benefits of these programs reach the most vulnerable and deserving households requires a streamlined, user-friendly application process.

Technological innovation

and consumer education are also integral to the success of HEEHRA and HOMES. Virginia must invest in and promote new energy-efficient technologies and support the infrastructural upgrades needed for their implementation. Concurrently, robust education and outreach campaigns are essential to raise awareness about the benefits of home electrification and energy efficiency, along with information on how to access the rebates and incentives offered.

Furthermore, the synergy between HEEHRA and HOMES and their alignment with other clean energy policies position Virginia as a leader in the national movement towards a more sustainable energy economy. These initiatives represent a significant opportunity for Virginians to actively participate in and reap the benefits of the clean energy transition. They stand as models for effective climate action and social equity, addressing both economic and environmental concerns.

In light of the initiatives and challenges presented, the integration of HEEHRA and HOMES into Virginia's energy policy landscape marks a pivotal moment in the state's environmental narrative. These acts are not just legislative measures; they embody a commitment to a more sustainable, equitable and prosperous future for all Virginians. Through these programs, the state is not only tackling the pressing issue of climate change but also addressing economic disparities by making clean

energy solutions more accessible to low- and moderate-income households.

The robust implementation of HEEHRA and HOMES is a testament to Virginia's proactive and forward-thinking approach. By reducing the financial barriers to home electrification and energy efficiency, these acts empower homeowners to become active participants in the state's clean energy transition. The ripple effects of this transition are far-reaching, extending beyond immediate energy savings to long-term environmental benefits, job creation in green technologies and the promotion of a healthier living environment. Moreover, the success of these programs will set a precedent for other states and regions, showcasing how policy innovation can effectively harmonize environmental stewardship with economic and social welfare.

As Virginia continues to navigate the complexities of this transformative journey, the successful enactment and integration of HEEHRA and HOMES will undoubtedly serve as a beacon, guiding the way towards a more sustainable and resilient future.

McKenna Dunbar is the community engagement coordinator of the Virginia Chapter.

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large size—900 acres” by Virginia Natural Heritage, (2) the larger Cliff Mountain old growth tract to the north and (3) the beautiful Cove Creek Headwaters old growth tract.

- Archer Knob: 4,700 acres of logging and 10 miles of roads are proposed in the Elliott Knob and Archer Knob Virginia mountain treasure areas west of Staunton, Virginia. Although significant portions of the area have been burned, possibly due to a controlled burn that got out of control, the Forest Service has not acknowledged the existing conditions, including the relative “open-ness” of the forest canopy caused by recent fires and other factors.

Other projects are being planned but details have yet to be released to the public, including First Mountain sal-

vage project (Lee Ranger District), Pine Mountain and Flatwoods projects (Clinch Ranger District), South Archer project (North River District), Crawfish Valley wildlife project (Eastern Divide District) and Paddy Knob early successional project (Warm Springs District).

It's up to all of us to help the Forest Service care for the land!

Sherman Bamford is the forests chair of the Virginia Chapter.



Old growth forest at Archer Knob (photo courtesy of Sherman Bamford).