



Speech of **Mike Santucci**, Forest Conservation Specialist for the Charlottesville Region of the Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF), at the consecration of the first EcoEternity Forest in the US, at Camp Highroad, Loudoun County, Virginia.

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SPEECH:

*ECOETERNITY FOREST CONSECRATION TALK*  
*23 October 2007*

*Well thank you very much for the nice introduction. It is a privilege to be here to speak to you this morning in such a beautiful setting.*

*I was talking to my friend from North Dakota the other day. When I asked her what came to mind when she thought of Virginia, she said “forested rolling hills and mountains”. And that is how many of us think about this place in which we live. Virginia is blessed with about 15 million acres of forestland; roughly two-thirds of the state can be considered forested. But imagine for a moment Virginia, or the northern Piedmont, without our forests. It’s difficult to do. Forests define where we live – from the scenic vistas to tourism and our economic base, forests are woven into the area’s identity. But this identity is in jeopardy from various sources, and preserving our forests will take a combination of public and political will.*

*We are well aware of the tangible goods that come from our forests; over 10,000 products are made from wood, wood fiber, or parts of a tree. No one standing here has gone through a day without benefiting from forest products. Each year, each one of us will consume the amount of wood in a 100-foot tall, 18-inch diameter tree. The average home contains the amount of wood products found on 10 acres of well-stocked forestland. From an economic standpoint, forestry is a leading industry in Virginia, contributing over \$29 billion to our state’s economy.*

*But those are the things you can touch and feel. What about the intrinsic values of forestland? Forests and trees provide us with abundant clean water and air, cooler environments, wildlife habitat, aesthetic beauty and spiritual renewal. Let me share with you some examples that you can wrap your arms around. Every day, one acre of forest produces enough oxygen for 18 people to breathe. They pull immeasurable amounts of carbon out of the environment, converting it to roots, trunks, branches and leaves. Forests act as natural water filters and help significantly slow the movement of storm water and runoff, ensuring both water quantity and quality. During a heavy rain, a healthy forest can absorb as much as 20,000 gallons of water every hour. Strategically placed trees around a home or office building can reduce summer cooling costs by a third. Similarly, winter heating costs can be reduced by using trees as windbreaks. Nearly every species of wildlife in the area depends upon trees or forests at some point in their life cycle.*



*I think that everyone appreciates the many benefits that forests provide. However, Virginia's forests are facing many risks in the near and long-term future. What are these risks? Is it fire, insects, catastrophic storms, or climate change? These certainly impact the forest and cause great damage but even at their worst these threats destroy individual trees or forest communities. They do not destroy the forest as an ecosystem. The trees that are lost eventually grow back or are replaced by other species. So these are not the greatest risks to the forests of Virginia. The greatest threat to the forest is conversion to another use. When a forest is cut down to make way for a shopping center or subdivision, that forest is truly lost.*

*Currently, Virginia is losing over 26,000 acres of forest each year to conversion and this rate is increasing. Some estimates are that Virginia will lose 1 million acres of forestland by the year 2040. Let me put that 26,000 acre figure in a different context for you. That's 71 acres every day. In the time we are standing here this morning, we will permanently lose another 3 acres of forestland. About 117,000 acres, or roughly 35% of Loudon County is currently forested. At its current rate, if all of Virginia's annual conversion were concentrated in Loudon County, the remaining forest would be eliminated in less than five years.*

*Combine that with an ever-growing population, and you begin to understand the pressures on our remaining forests. Virginia has 6 of the top 100 growing counties in the nation, and the Piedmont is ranked as one of the most threatened areas nationally. Loudon County has been the fastest growing locality in the country over the last five years. The population is expected to continue growing, increasing by 39 percent in the next 10 years. By 2025, Virginia's population will grow to eight and a half million people, one and a half million more than today. In that same time span, we will most likely lose a half million acres of forestland.*

*Since Virginia began 400 years ago, working farms and forests have been central to the spirit and success of the state. These lands have sustained the citizens of the Commonwealth by providing vital environmental, aesthetic, social, and economic benefits. However, at the current rate, more farm and forestland in Virginia will be converted in the next 40 years than all the land that has been developed since Jamestown was platted. That's a loss that many of us will actually experience within our lifetimes.*

*Governor Kaine has recognized the value of our forests, and the risks facing them. Political leadership to protect our forestland is expressed in his pledge to protect 400,000 acres of open space and forestland by the year 2010. His aspiration is challenging, but visionary. When he announced the 400,000 acre goal, he noted that with each passing day "land is becoming more expensive and scarcer. I will set and meet this preservation goal during my term – not just because it is the right thing to do -*



*I will do it because if I don't, the opportunity to do it will not be there for future Governors or future Virginians." Our General Assembly has demonstrated similar leadership by funding several land conservation programs recently.*

*You are aware of the benefits of healthy forests, and the conversion threat facing them. What can we do in the face of this seeming suburban manifest destiny, the relentless onward march of conversion and development? Public resolve can be expressed through land protection agreements, being involved in the political process, and a myriad of other ways.*

*One example of public determination is the place we are standing right now. This 600-acre forested jewel benefits not only the users of Highroad, but their neighbors and the citizens of Loudon County as well. Creative and concerned individuals looked for ways to keep this property forested and profitable without handing it over to urban developers. This was accomplished through a unique partnership with EcoEternity. The partnership allowed forested land to be protected through memorial trees, which help preserve the memories of departed loved ones. EcoEternity is one of several organizations that search for innovative ways to conserve and protect forests, not just for us, but for our children and grandchildren.*

*And on a larger scale, there are successes when we talk about protecting forestland. Last year alone, nearly 100,000 acres were placed in land preservation agreements, a new single year record. So far this year to date, over 70,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land have been placed under conservation partnerships. Over 450,000 acres of open space and forestland are under land conservation agreements across the Commonwealth, with Loudon County helping lead the way. Over 3000 acres were protected last year, bringing the grand total to more than 40,000 acres of privately protected land in the county.*

*Many other conservation tools and strategies exist that will enable us to preserve natural areas and forestland. It starts at the individual landowner level, first through individual behavior and choices. Make the effort to reduce your footprint, and buy locally grown produce and wood products, which will help local farms and forests remain economically viable. If you are fortunate enough to own forestland, a second important step is to make sure they are sustainably managed under the guidance of professional natural resource management plans. Thousands of acres across Virginia, even though they may not be under a protective easement, are managed in such a manner. Finally, family and estate planning is a critical step to allow the transfer of land to heirs, and the continued proper management of natural resources. While most current landowners are under pressure to develop their land, most loss of forestland occurs with intergenerational transfer.*



*At a community level, become informed, and get involved in local government. We all realize that we live in a highly desirable area for the reasons I mentioned previously. Growth and development will happen. Many tools exist in the planning and zoning process that help balance growth with protection of our forests. Careful planning for growth can reduce its negative impacts by preserving clean air, clean water, and natural areas. For example, conservation overlays help protect lands with critical natural resource and water quality values. Land use value taxation and Agricultural and Forestal Districts are ways for localities to maintain working farms and forests, thus helping preserve the rural character of an area.*

*Making a difference can be as simple as supporting conservation programs and entities. There are a myriad of concerned and creative organizations out there working to protect farm and forestland, including many state agencies, conservation associations, and local landowner groups. Programs include protective land conservation agreements, or the purchase or transfer of development rights. Such donations provide many tax benefits at the state and federal level. Virginia has one of the most generous land conservation tax benefits in the country. Some groups are working with developers to encourage development that has less of an environmental footprint. Others are out there, collaborating with local governments to incorporate green infrastructure elements into comprehensive plans. Still others are exploring ways to compensate private landowners for the ecosystem benefits their forestland provides to society.*

*Virginia's forests are incomparable and invaluable. They connect us to our past, and set the course for a prosperous future. Times have certainly changed in the last 400 years, but the need for farm and forestlands and the benefits they provide has not diminished. If anything, their importance has become magnified. Protecting rural lands is critical to preserving these values, and maintaining Virginia's reputation as a woodland state. But protecting our open space and forestland goes beyond outward appearances. Forestland, be it in an urban or rural setting, is the most environmentally friendly land use, and conserving it provides crucial benefits to the citizens of Virginia. Undoubtedly, Virginia and the northern Piedmont are undergoing tremendous change, with no end in sight to shifts in demographics and land use patterns. These changes will continue to have dramatic effects on the sustainability of forests, and the preservation of a rural character we all treasure. If we are to protect the image and benefits Virginia enjoys as a "forested state," landowners, conservation groups, and all levels of government must continue to work together to reaffirm and strengthen existing programs, and developing new, creative ideas such as EcoEternity. We all need to work together, meshing political and public will, to face the challenges ahead.*

*Thank you so much for having me here today.*