

COLONIAL



SWCD

NEWSLETTER

Winter 2026



SERVING:

The City of  
Williamsburg

Charles City County  
James City County

New Kent County  
York County



[www.colonialswcd.org](http://www.colonialswcd.org)



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## Upcoming Events

Cover photograph by Jessica Wakefield

### New Kent Bug Event



March 21, 2026  
10:00 am-2:00 pm  
New Kent High School  
7365 Egypt Road  
New Kent, VA

[Click for more info](#)

### Spring into Conservation



May 2, 2026  
9:00 am-noon  
Freedom Park  
Interpretive Center  
Centerville Road  
Williamsburg, VA

[Click here to register](#)

## Staff Contact Information

JIM WALLACE  
District Programs  
Manager  
(804) 654-1246

AMY WALKER  
Operations Manager  
(804) 695-7904

AMANDA WHISPELL  
Education & Outreach  
Specialist  
(757) 778-5348

ROBYN WOOLSEY  
Senior Conservation  
Specialist  
(757) 778-1216

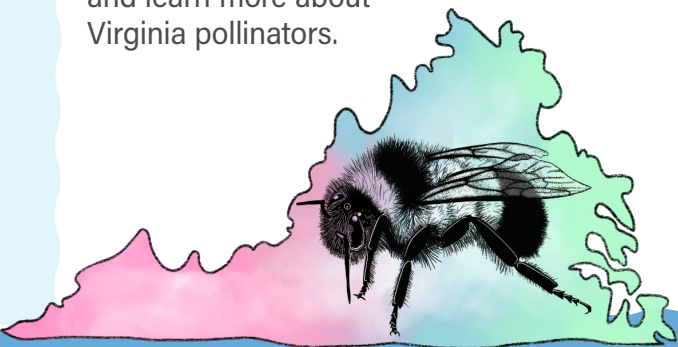
EMMA RICH  
Conservation Specialist  
(757) 778-0631

ROBERT WARING  
Senior Agricultural  
Conservation Specialist  
(804) 920-1202

SAMANTHA PEREIRA  
Conservation Specialist  
(757) 759-0528

## Colonial Pollinator Pledge

Do you love pollinators and want to do something to help native pollinators? Then try taking our Colonial Pollinator Pledge! The pledge only asks that you try your best to make five small changes to benefit pollinators. Please check out the [Colonial Pollinator Pledge on our website](#) and learn more about Virginia pollinators.





# VASWCD 2025 Annual Conference

## Wayne Davis and Amy Walker

The Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (VASWCD) held its Annual Meeting Conference December 7-9 in Williamsburg at the DoubleTree Hotel. Soil and Water Conservation District staff and Directors from across the Commonwealth attended, along with numerous partner organizations, totaling more than 525 registered participants.

The conference highlighted conservation efforts throughout Virginia and featured keynote speakers including Stephanie Taillon, Secretary of Natural and Historic Resources; Matthew Lohr, Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry; Adrienne Kotula, Virginia Director for the Chesapeake Bay Commission; Dave Neudeck, Communications and Marketing Director with the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR); and Greg Steele, Chief Resilience Officer with the Office of Commonwealth Resilience.



**Wayne Davis**  
Director, New Kent County

**Amy Walker**  
Operations Manager



Benjamin Franklin (portrayed by BJ Pryor) of Colonial Williamsburg Gardens. Photograph by Dave Beals.



The conference was opened with fife and drums provided by the Williamsburg Field Musick Fife's & Drums.





Attendees participated in a wide variety of informational sessions held throughout each day. Key topics included soil health initiatives, National Wildlife Federation Grow More training, human resources, marketing, and grant writing.

The Colonial Soil and Water Conservation District was well represented at the meeting and assisted VASWCD with coordinating live music and presenters for the conference. This marked the first annual meeting to feature scheduled live music each day, and the local musicians and presenters were extremely well received by attendees. The conference opened with fife and drums, provided by the Williamsburg Field Musick Fifes & Drums, showcasing the rich history of Williamsburg. Featured local musicians included Chap Cash, Elijah Righter (New Kent), the Virginia ShellPhish Coalition (Newport News), and Luna Puckett and Kim Person (York). Presenters included Benjamin Franklin (portrayed by BJ Pryor) and Eve Otmar of Colonial Williamsburg Gardens.

The conference concluded with an awards banquet recognizing outstanding service and achievement. Highlights include Jim Wallace, District Programs Manager, receiving the Chaffin employee of the year award—the award honors Jim's 20 years of exceptional service, dedication, and commitment to the District—and Dave Beals, Director, City of Williamsburg, being selected for first vice president of the State Association. Also, ten farms across the Commonwealth were recognized as grand basin award winners for the exceptional conservation work implemented on their farm operations.



Jim Wallace accepting the Chaffin District Employee of the Year of award from CSWCD York County Director, Pam Mason during the awards banquet.



Musical act the Virginia ShellPhish Coalition from Newport News.





# Why I like being a CSWCD Director

## Dave Beals

It's not often in this life that you get a chance to be part of something good. I'm an old man who may be running out of chances.

They found me in the woods back behind my house. I was cleaning up a trail. A stranger came by and we got to talking. He told me about the Soil and Water Conservation Districts and that Colonial was looking for someone to fill a vacant Director spot. I had never heard of Soil and Water Conservation Districts. No idea who they are or what they did. It turned out to be a chance.

SWCDs help people who want to help the land. We have access to grant money that helps put conservation projects on the ground. Turns out we are the biggest single funder of conservation projects in our area. It's a public-private partnership of the best kind—a farmer or homeowner may have a conservation project but not have the necessary funds; when partnered with a SWCD we make things happen.

I got interested in soil health. We can help a farmer increase the biological activity of their soil; this can lead to reducing or eliminating the amount of fertilizer, pesticides, or fungicides they need to bring in a crop. These reductions make for less run off into the bay at the same time they increase a farmer's profitability; that's a win-win. The techniques we use increase the amount of carbon held in the soil; this makes for healthier soil while sequestering carbon from the atmosphere, another win-win for the farmer and environment. Healthier soil is healthier food and healthier people.

For a homeowner we have a lot of projects we can help with. Things like planting native plants around your house or putting in permeable pavement may seem small on an individual scale, but when you get a lot of projects going there's a multiplier effect. Our funding helps folks who care about the environment make these projects happen.



## Dave Beals

Director, City of Williamsburg

Shoreline projects are particularly important since we are surrounded by rivers. These projects can be very expensive. Our funding makes projects happen that otherwise wouldn't.

Helping people who want to help the environment; that's a great chance to take.

When my chance came, I'm glad I took it.

Take a chance with us. I think you'll be glad you did.



Newly installed permeable pavement. Photograph by Robyn Woolsey.





# Growing Healthy Turf in the Transition Zone

## Robyn Woolsey

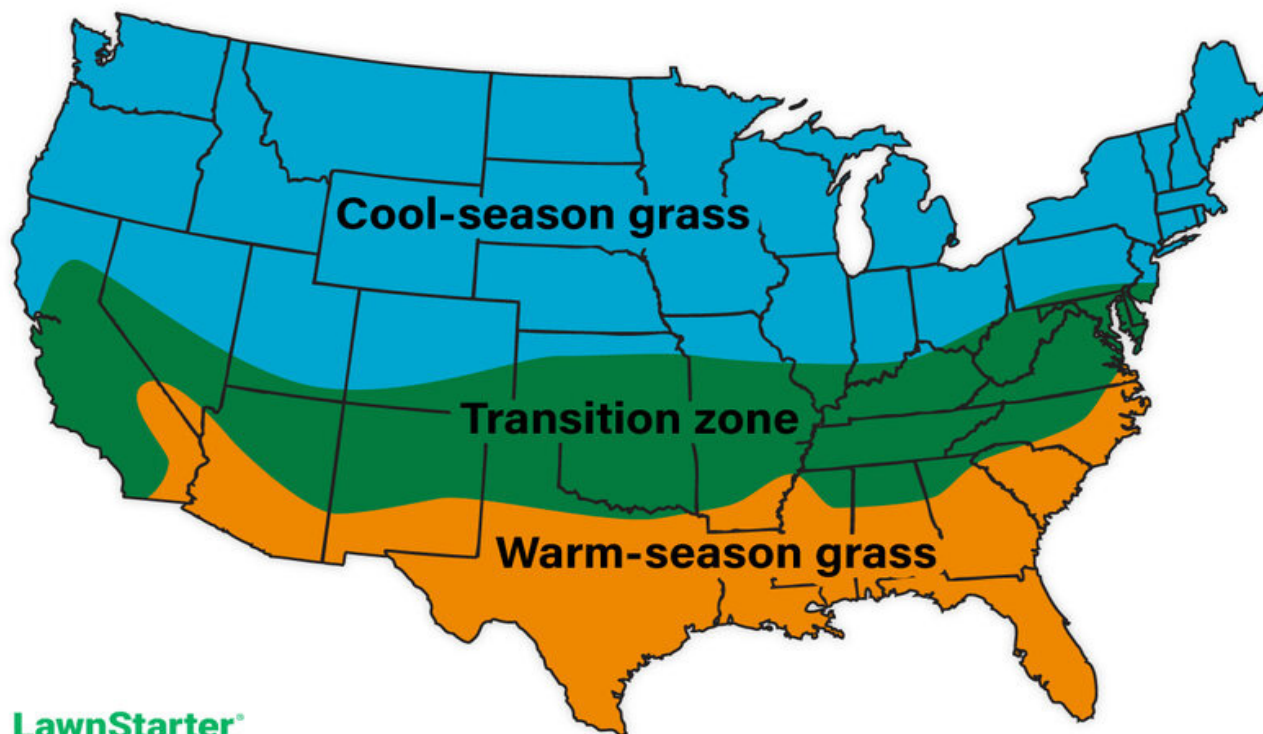
When I first began learning about turfgrass management in preparation to assist with the Turf Love program, I heard a lot about Virginia being in the Transition Zone, where “you can grow warm season and cool season turf, but you can’t grow either well” as my late mentor Bob Winters would say. The Transition Zone, shown in the map below, is a climatic region with generally hot summers and cold winters, both of which can stress warm and cool season species.

To understand how and why both types of turf can struggle in this region, it’s important to know the basics of cool and warm season growth cycles. The ideal growing season for warm season grasses, including bermudagrass and zoysiagrass, is late spring through summer, when temperatures average 75–90 degrees. With our warming climate, this heat tolerance is an important strength to keep in mind when selecting



**Robyn Woolsey**  
Senior Conservation Specialist

a turf species for your property. Warm season grasses are also significantly more drought tolerant than cool season species and generally are less susceptible to pests and disease. Warm



Map of the United States showing preferred growth zones for cool and warm season species and the transition zone.





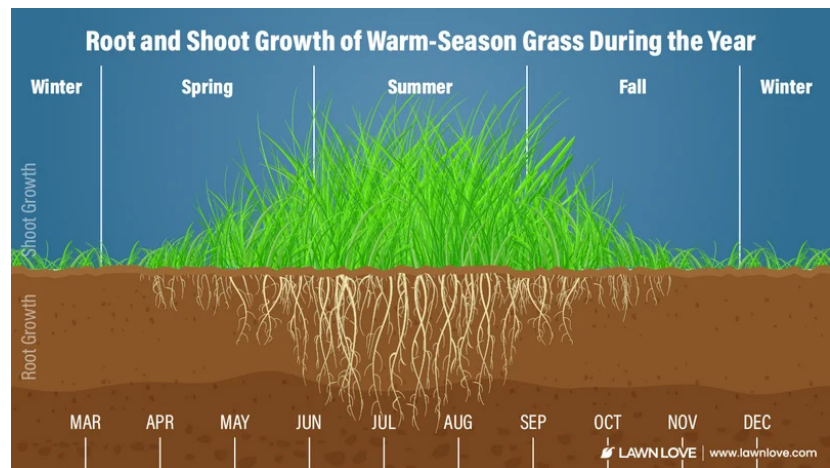
season species also tend to grow and spread more rapidly, which can be helpful to prevent bare spots in the lawn, but can also lead to encroachment into landscape beds and requires more frequent mowing in the peak of their growing season. Another important feature of warm season grasses is that they go dormant in the winter, which causes them to turn a yellowish-brown color for about four months out of the year.

The ideal growing seasons for cool season species, including tall fescue, bluegrass, and ryegrass, are spring and fall.

While we see significant shoot growth in the spring, most cool season root growth occurs in the fall, which is the ideal time for any necessary fertilization.

Cool season species are still most commonly grown in this region; however, they are not as well suited to deal with increasing average temperatures. Cool season species generally require more water for healthy growth, and most require annual overseeding to help fill in bare spots. Cool season grasses maintain their green color throughout the year, unless there is an extreme drought in the summer, and require less mowing in the heat of the summer when growth slows due to heat stress. Cool season species are also more shade tolerant than warm season turf, which cannot grow in shade.

While there are positives and negatives for both types of turf in this region, it's important to understand the habitat requirements and growth patterns for both to make sure that you have the best chance of success with growing the lawn you want. Once you've decided on what type of turf you're going to grow, it's equally important to follow the appropriate management schedule for that species.



Typical growth chart for warm season turf species.



Typical growth chart for cool season turf species.

Over fertilization and fertilization at the wrong time of the year can cause significant environmental harm, and often results in wasted time and money.

If you're unsure which turf type is best for your property, or if you'd like help managing your lawn, consider signing up for the District's [\*\*Turf Love program\*\*](#), which includes a professionally analyzed soil sample and written report detailing recommendations to support your lawn care goals.





# The Virginia Conservation Assistance Program: Current Program Status and Funding Request

## Emma Rich

Since its inception nearly a decade ago, the Virginia Conservation Assistance Program (VCAP) has experienced a 300% increase in popularity statewide—a growth that has been significantly felt by the Colonial district. Over the last few years, Colonial SWCD has continued to see record breaking VCAP interest with 82 site visits and 58 applications submitted in the first six months of fiscal year 2026 alone. VCAP receives biennial funding from the Department of Conservation and Recreation and in the last budget cycle, received \$4 million for July 2024–June 2026. From June–December 2024, the program utilized alternate funding sources and didn't begin pulling from the state money until the start of 2025. Within those first six months of 2025, approximately \$2 million dollars—over half of the allotted funding—had been obligated with a year and a half still left before the next budget cycle began. In an effort to avoid running out of funding before June of 2026, VCAP program administrators implemented a rolling waitlist and a set approval budget per month. Projects with highest ranking scores (a cost benefit analysis based on water quality improvement) and costs that fall within the monthly budget are approved and the rest are neither approved nor denied but put on the rolling waitlist for consideration at a later date. While the waitlist will allow for approved projects through the end of fiscal year 2026, it is not a sustainable long-term solution—what the VCAP program really needs is increased



**Emma Rich**  
Conservation Specialist

funding! The Virginia Association of Soil & Water Conservation District is seeking a biennial investment of \$7–8 million dollars to keep up with the current demands of the program and ensure that we can continue to provide conservation assistance to the best of our ability. If you would like to show your support of the VCAP program and efforts for increased funding, please consider completing [this form](#) that will be automatically sent to your local legislators. For more details of VCAP's decade-long impact [click here](#) and for more information on VASWCD legislative issues please visit [vaswcd.org/conservation-issues](https://vaswcd.org/conservation-issues).



**Virginia Conservation  
Assistance Program**





# Beneficial Bugs – Soldier Beetles

## Amanda Whispell

When people think of beneficial insects, bees and ladybugs often steal the spotlight. Yet quietly at work in fields, gardens, and meadows is another valuable ally: the soldier beetle. Often mistaken for fireflies, dismissed as just another small beetle, or thought to be pests, soldier beetles provide important ecosystem services throughout their entire life cycle—both as larvae and as adults.

Soldier beetles belong to the family Cantharidae and are sometimes called leatherwing beetles because of their soft, flexible wing covers. They are commonly found on flowers, grasses, and low vegetation during late spring and summer. Unlike many insects that are beneficial only in one stage of life, soldier beetles contribute positively to ecosystems from larva to adult.

### Beneficial Larvae: Pest Control in the Soil

The larval stage (Fig. 1) of soldier beetles is spent mostly out of sight, but their impact is significant. Soldier beetle larvae live in soil, leaf litter, and under debris, where they act as voracious predators.



**Figure 1.** Soldier beetle larva – small and rarely seen. Photograph © Judy Gallagher. ([flickr](#))

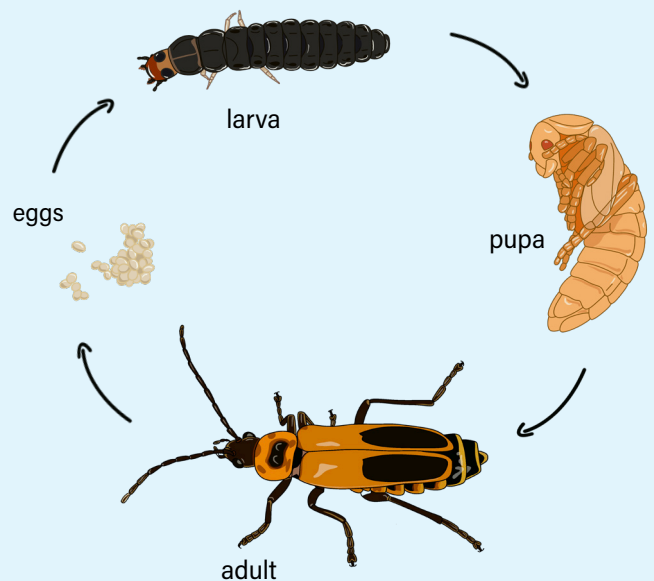


## Amanda Whispell

### Education & Outreach Specialist

Their primary ecological role at this stage is biological pest control. Larvae feed on a wide variety of soft-bodied pests, including:

- Aphids
- Caterpillars
- Fly larvae
- Beetle eggs
- Slugs and snails



**Figure 2.** Life cycle of a soldier beetle.





**Figure 3.** Soldier beetle diversity. **3a.** Adult soldier beetle (*Atalantycha billneata*). Photograph © Judy Gallagher. ([flickr](#))

By preying on these organisms, soldier beetle larvae help regulate pest populations before they reach damaging levels. This reduces the need for chemical pesticides, supporting healthier soils and less polluted waterways.

Additionally, their movement through soil and leaf litter contributes modestly to soil aeration and nutrient cycling, helping organic matter break down and improving soil structure.

### Beneficial Adults: Pollinators and Predators

As adults, the extremely diverse (Fig. 3) soldier beetles emerge as active participants in above-ground ecosystems. They are most commonly seen on flowers, where they feed on pollen and nectar. In doing so, they provide an often-overlooked but valuable service: pollination.

While they are not as specialized or efficient as bees, soldier beetles visit a wide range of flowering plants, including wildflowers, herbs, and some crops. Their frequent movement between blooms helps transfer pollen, contributing to plant reproduction and biodiversity.

Adult soldier beetles also continue their role as predators. Along with pollen and nectar, they consume aphids, small insects, and insect eggs. This dual diet allows them to support both plant health and pest suppression simultaneously.



**3b.** Adult soldier beetle. Photograph © Judy Gallagher. ([flickr](#))



**3c.** Adult soldier beetle (*Podabrus rugosulus*). Photograph © Judy Gallagher. ([flickr](#))



**3d.** Adult soldier beetle (*Podabrus tomentosus*). Photograph © Judy Gallagher. ([flickr](#))





## Ecosystem Services Provided by Soldier Beetles

Across both life stages, soldier beetles offer multiple ecosystem services that benefit natural and human-managed landscapes:

- **Biological pest control:** they reduce populations of harmful insects without chemicals.
- **Pollination:** they support flowering plants and overall biodiversity.
- **Soil health:** they aid decomposition and nutrient cycling during the larval stage.
- **Food web support:** they serve as prey for birds, amphibians, and other beneficial insects.

Because they are active in different habitats and at different times of the year, soldier beetles help stabilize ecosystems by filling multiple ecological roles. From pest-eating larvae hidden

beneath the soil to pollen-carrying adults visiting your flowers (Fig. 4), they provide continuous benefits throughout their lives.

Rather than viewing all beetles as pests, understanding the role of soldier beetles reveals a more nuanced picture—one in which small, often unnoticed insects play an outsized role in maintaining ecological balance.

In a time when insect populations are declining worldwide, recognizing and supporting beneficial insects like soldier beetles is increasingly important. They thrive in diverse, pesticide-free environments with native plants, leaf litter, and undisturbed soil. Gardens and landscapes that welcome soldier beetles often enjoy healthier plants, fewer pest outbreaks, and increased pollinator activity. By supporting soldier beetles and other beneficial insects, we strengthen the ecosystems that sustain our gardens, farms, and wild spaces alike.



**Figure 4.** A pair of mating Goldenrod Soldier Beetle (*Chauliognathus pensylvanicus*). Photograph © Judy Gallagher. ([flickr](#))





# Virginia Association of Biological Farming Conference

## Samantha Pereira

Colonial staff and directors have attended the Virginia Association of Biological Farming (VABF) conference for the past four years. A primary focus of our attendance has been promoting the Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture grant, a USDA grant funded through Virginia Tech; which provides financial assistance to farmers implementing climate-smart practices that improve soil health and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Beyond grant promotion, this conference offers valuable networking opportunities for our staff to connect with farmers, conservation professionals, and agricultural experts from across Virginia and surrounding states. The educational sessions and workshops help keep our team informed about the latest developments in sustainable and regenerative agriculture. The relationships we've built and the knowledge gained at VABF conferences strengthen our ability to provide meaningful support and



**Samantha Pereira**  
Conservation Specialist

guidance to the producers we serve. We look forward to attending VABF again next year and hope to see you there!

For more information regarding VABF please visit: [www.vabf.org](http://www.vabf.org)





# 2026 Five County Agricultural Conference

## Robert Waring

The 2026 Five County Ag Conference was held on Wednesday, January 7, 2026, at the Meadow Event Park Pavilion in Doswell, VA. Organized by the Virginia Cooperative Extension, the event provides technical research updates and economic outlooks for agricultural producers in the region. The 2026 program focused on market volatility, emerging crop diseases, and new agricultural technologies. Economic updates included a grain market outlook session presented by the Virginia Farm Bureau and an agricultural economy outlook outlined by experts from Virginia Tech. Agronomy sessions included technical presentations on the "Best Bean for your Buck" (soybean management) and research updates on "Tar Spot of Corn" in Virginia. A new topic on farm management addressed farmer well-being with a session on managing farm stress.

The 2026 Five County Ag Conference also featured a central panel discussion focused on the Agriculture Economy Outlook. The panel was a key part of the morning session and focused on the following themes:

- **Current Economic Status:** Discussions led by Dr. Mario Ortez (Assistant Professor of Agribusiness at Virginia Tech) provided a baseline for the current state of the agricultural economy.
- **Market Projections:** The panel explored the outlook for the 2026 season, specifically addressing how broader economic trends might impact regional farming operations.



## Robert Waring

Senior Agricultural  
Conservation Specialist

- **Commodity Insights:** It integrated insights from the preceding Commodity Grain Market Update given by Robert Harper of the Virginia Farm Bureau.
- **Local Perspectives:** Local figures, including Ronnie Gill and representatives from the Virginia Tech Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, participated to provide context specific to the five-county region (Caroline, Essex, Hanover, King and Queen, and King William).

This discussion was designed to help producers navigate financial planning for the year ahead, complementing later technical sessions on soybean profitability and corn disease research.

## Recent Interviews Featuring Robert Waring

- [Growing Fertilizer in the Heart of Virginia: One Farmer's Story of Resilience](#)  
Elizabeth Beggins, American Farmland Trust, November 12, 2025
- [Healthy Soil Cuts Inputs, Boosts Profits According to Corn and Soybean Farmer](#)  
Dave Lefever, Lancaster Farming, November 19, 2025
- [Profitability and Nutrient Use Efficiency on Brandon Farms \(video\)](#)  
Department of Conservation and Recreation, December 9, 2025

*Profitable farms create healthier watersheds. In this interview, Bob Waring of Brandon Farms and CSWCD and Virginia Tech Agronomist Hunter Frame discuss water management challenges on Brandon Farms, maximizing per acre profit, nutrient use efficiency, best management practices, and cost-share programs that benefit Virginia's farms.*





# Jamestown High School Places 10th at the International NCF-Envirothon Competition

## Amanda Whispell

The Jamestown High School Envirothon team earned an impressive 10th-place finish at the International National Conservation Foundation-Envirothon competition, held in Alberta, Canada this past July.

The students competed against 54 teams from across the United States, Canada, China, and Singapore, and the Jamestown students showcased their knowledge and teamwork on a global stage.

NCF-Envirothon is an international environmental and natural resource problem-solving competition that challenges students to apply

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) principles to real-world environmental issues. Through hands-on, outdoor field experiences, teams demonstrate their understanding of aquatic ecology, forestry, soils, wildlife, and current environmental topics.

Jamestown advanced to the international competition after capturing the Virginia state championship at the Dominion Energy Envirothon in May at Mary Washington University. Competing against 15 other teams, Jamestown earned first place in forestry and soils, second place in aquatics and the special topic, and third place in wildlife—securing their spot to represent Virginia on the international stage.



(Left to right) front row: Charlie Dubay (coach), Mia Bakker, Eleanor Rossi, Amanda Mullane (coach),  
back row: Diego Cordero Muñiz, Teagan Ketterman, Elizabeth Oman, and Rebecca Elton (coach).