

# ACE Ranking Criteria Update: Summary and Options for Consideration

## **Background:**

Conserving biological diversity has become an important element of the Comprehensive Plan and protection of rural areas within the County. The Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), completed in 2018, is a science-based tool that uses GIS modelling and the best available data to identify strategies and priority sites for biodiversity conservation throughout the County. The BAP specifically recommends strengthening the ACE Program and revising the ACE ranking criteria to better identify potential easement properties that help protect these biodiversity values and critical resources.

Many of the existing criteria contain broad elements of natural resource protection. Prioritizing larger properties, adjacency to conserved lands, minimization of development, and protection of mountain and water resources are all elements of the existing ranking criteria that contribute indirectly to biodiversity protection. Refining the existing ranking criteria by incorporating elements of the BAP will help to provide a more direct focus on protection of ecological resources that are important at the local level and at a scale that is appropriate for the County. The goal of this process is to incorporate new criteria or improve existing criteria using an objective approach that will maintain the proper balance so no single criterion is over weighted and becomes the “tail that wags the dog”. That said, Criterion C.5 is vital so it should carry good weight.

## **Proposed options for exploration by Working Group:**

### **1. Criterion C.5 (Biodiversity):**

- **Current Language:** The parcel contains an occurrence listed on the Virginia Natural Heritage Inventory or a qualified biologist submitted documentation of an occurrence of a natural heritage resource to the program administrator and the Virginia Division of Natural Heritage on behalf of the owner: five (5) points.
- **Alternative Language:** The parcel intersects a *Large Forest Block* identified in the County BAP: Forest block composite score of 3.1-4 (1 point) or forest block composite score of >4.1 (2 points) with 2 additional points if forest block intersects >50% of parcel; the parcel provides *Habitat Connectivity Opportunity* by intersecting a large Connected Forest Block (2 points) or a contributing Small Forest Block (1 point) with 1 additional point if parcel forms a primary connection between different forest blocks; the parcel intersects a recognized *Natural Heritage Resource*, including a DCR Element Occurrence (3 points), a DCR Conservation Site or Stream Conservation Unit (2 points), or a recognized and verified site that supports biodiversity (2 points).

The following descriptions for additions to Criterion C.5 provide detail for the alternative above. A simpler and more concise alternative might reference the detail and method of scoring elsewhere in the ACE Ordinance instead of trying to encapsulate it all in a single paragraph.

- Possible Additions to Criterion C.5:
  - A. The parcel is overlapped by a **Large Forest Block** identified in the County BAP.
    - The composite score for *large forest blocks* within the BAP includes size, connectivity, compactness (minimal edge), important sites, DCR occurrences, resiliency to climate change, and other factors (see BAP, pages 11, 20).
    - Proposed scoring:
      - Overlapped by Forest block composite score of 3.1-4 = 1 points
      - Overlapped by Forest block composite score of >4.1 = 2 points
      - Forest block overlaps more than half of the parcel = 2 additional points
  - B. The parcel provides a **Habitat Connectivity Opportunity**.
    - Habitat Connectivity Opportunities are defined geographic areas that were identified in the BAP analysis that can provide meaningful habitat connections within and between Conservation Focus Areas (see BAP, pages 16, 23).
    - Proposed scoring:
      - Overlapped by a Large Connected Forest Block = 2 points
      - Overlapped by a Contributing Small Forest Block = 1 points
      - Forms a connection linking separate Large Forest Blocks = 1 additional point
  - C. The parcel contains a recognized **Natural Heritage Resource**, including a DCR Element Occurrence (rare species or significant natural community), a DCR Conservation Site or Stream Conservation Unit, or a recognized and verified site that supports biodiversity. (**E.g.** locations of locally rare species or habitats, or those identified through scientific studies)
    - Proposed scoring:
      - DCR Conservation Site or SCU, or other verified resource = 2 points
      - DCR Element Occurrence = 3 points

## 2. Criterion C.8 (Riparian Buffers):

- Current Language: The parcel adjoins or contains perennial stream(s), as that term is defined in Chapter 17 of the Albemarle County Code: one (1) point for each one thousand (1000) feet of frontage.
- Alternative Language: The parcel adjoins or contains perennial stream(s), as that term is defined in Chapter 17 of the Albemarle County Code: one (1) point for each one thousand (1000) feet of frontage or; the parcel contains an intermittent stream: one half (0.5) point for voluntary protection of 35' permanent riparian buffers for each one thousand (1000) feet of frontage.

#### **Additional Considerations for C.8:**

- Protection of intermittent streams was removed in the last revision of the ranking criteria. Riparian buffers along intermittent streams provide valuable habitat and connectivity and contribute to water quality protection; voluntary protection should be strongly encouraged through ACE easements.

#### **3. Criterion A.2 (Parcel Size):**

- Current Language: Size of the parcel: zero (0) points for parcels of less than fifty (50) acres; one (1) point for parcels of at least fifty (50) acres; one (1) additional point for each fifty (50) acres over fifty (50) acres; one (1) additional point for each fifty (50) acres over two hundred (200) acres.

**Note:** Last phrase typo – should be 2 additional points? If not, it is already covered by the preceding phrase.

- Alternative Language: Size of the parcel: zero (0) points for parcels of less than fifty (50) acres; one (1) point per 50 acres for parcels greater than 50 acres with one (1) additional point for each fifty (50) acres over 200 acres.

#### **4. Criterion C.2 (Working Family Farm):**

- Current Language: Working family farm, including forestry: five (5) points if at least one family member's principal occupation and income (more than half) is farming or foresting the parcel; three (3) points if at least one family member has as a secondary occupation farming or foresting the parcel so that it is eligible for or subject to land use taxation as land devoted to agriculture, horticulture or forest use under Albemarle County Code § 15-800 *et seq.*; one (1) additional point if the parcel is certified as a Virginia Century Farm by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
- Alternative Language: Working family farm, including forestry: five (5) points if at least one family member's principal occupation and income (more than half) is farming or foresting the parcel; three (3) points if at least one family member has as a secondary occupation farming or foresting the parcel so that it is eligible for or subject to land use taxation as land devoted to agriculture, horticulture or forest use under Albemarle County Code § 15-800 *et seq.*; one (1) additional point if the parcel is certified as a Virginia Century Farm by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services **or certified as a Century Forest by the Virginia Department of Forestry.**