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ELIZABETH RIVER PROJECT, WETLANDS WATCH, AND COASTAL VIRGINIA CONSERVANCY PARTNER TO PROTECT WETLANDS FROM SEA LEVEL RISE

First Rolling Conservation Easement in the Nation to be Signed on January 16, 2024

Norfolk, Va – The Elizabeth River Project, a non-profit organization dedicated to restoring the Elizabeth River and its native ecosystems, is proud to announce a groundbreaking project with Wetlands Watch and the Coastal Virginia Conservancy (CVC) that will help wetlands migrate in the face of rising seas.

In a brief 11 a.m. ceremony on Tuesday, January 16th, the partners will sign a first in the nation rolling conservation easement that is geared to sea level rise. The ceremony will be held at the Elizabeth River Project’s Ryan Resilience Lab at 4610 Colley Avenue. The mission of this globally significant facility is to explore how to live, work, and play in an urban floodplain as seas rise.

Rolling conservation easements function like typical conservation easements in that they are legal agreements between landowners and land trusts that permanently prohibit development activities that compromise the environmental values of the land. The ERP rolling easement is different in that it requires the removal of structures from the property once the seas have risen to key levels. This legal instrument ensures that wetlands can migrate inland as the shoreline erodes without being blocked by development or hard structures. It will also permanently preserve the public’s right to access the property.

The first of its kind rolling conservation easement was designed by Wetlands Watch, a Norfolk-based climate adaptation nonprofit, after three years of consultations with climate change, conservation, and legal experts from across the nation. The easement will be held by the Coastal Virginia Conservancy (CVC), the region’s only local land trust that protects land forever, most often for public use.

The Elizabeth River Project is the first organization in the nation to commit to a rolling conservation easement of this kind. The non-profit has been working for 30 years to restore native ecosystems along the Elizabeth River, and thanks to its dynamic collaborations with a wide variety of stakeholders, the river has seen a remarkable comeback of brown pelicans, dolphins, seahorses, and other wildlife. ERP also recognizes that threats posed by sea level rise constitute the river's greatest emerging challenges, with more than 80% of wetlands predicted to drown in the next century.

"Elizabeth River Project is proud to help lead innovation in the space of wetland adaptation to rising sea levels. We hope this effort will inspire others to take similar steps," said Marjorie Mayfield Jackson, Executive Director, Elizabeth River Project.

Mary-Carson Stiff, the Executive Director of Wetlands Watch, agrees. "Wetlands Watch is excited to partner with Elizabeth River Project and CVC to create the first rolling conservation easement in the country. This is a win-win-win for wetlands, landowners, and the public. Wetlands Watch has been working for nearly ten years to figure out the role that land conservation and rolling easements can play in protecting wetlands from drowning under the threat of sea level rise. This work is finally being realized through the easement on the ERP property."

Liz Friel, the Executive Director of CVC, is also proud of the historic nature of the agreement. "CVC is honored to be the holder of the first rolling conservation easement in the nation. We have been conserving land and restoring waterways in coastal Virginia for over 20 years. We deeply understand the value of conservation easements for landowners, communities, and the environment, but recognize that conservation easements need to evolve and adapt to the changing realities of sea level rise and coastal erosion. We are grateful to ERP for their generosity and leadership in donating their land for a rolling conservation easement."

A new art installation by Adam Marcus titled Tidal Column has been commissioned to denote the point of retreat for the building. Marrying art and science, the installation is scheduled for Spring 2024.

The signing ceremony and tour will take place at the Ryan Resilience Lab, 4610 Colley Ave, Norfolk, VA 23508. The event is open to the media, and media interviews will be available following the signing. Media tours of the Ryan Resilience Lab are also available upon request. For more information, please contact Casey Shaw at (757) 613-0411 or cshaw@elizabethriver.org.

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The non-profit Elizabeth River Project has worked since 1993 to restore the environmental health of the urban Elizabeth River, once presumed dead. Our work is made possible by membership support. Do something beautiful. Join us today: ElizabethRiver.org.