



**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA**  
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# **Students Help Restore Former Coal Mine Land at Virginia Energy's 20th Annual Arbor Day Event**

*For a full photo gallery and high-resolution b-roll, [click here](#).*

**RICHMOND, VA** — The Virginia Department of Energy (Virginia Energy) hosted its 20th annual Virginia Arbor Day celebration April 23, 2026 near Richlands in Tazewell County, where nearly 70 students from Richlands High School helped restore a former coal mine site by planting 500 trees across three acres as part of the Commonwealth's ongoing commitment to revitalizing coal communities through environmental stewardship and economic development.

"This annual celebration is a testament to what is possible when we honor the land and invest in the next generation," said Michael Skiffington, Acting Director of Virginia Energy. "The students from Richlands High School are planting more than trees today — they are planting roots of environmental leadership in a community that has long powered our Commonwealth. Transforming this former mine site is exactly the kind of forward-looking work Virginia Energy is proud to champion."

This long-running event has restored more than 45 acres with over 13,000 trees since the program's inception in 2005. This year's planting featured economically valuable and ecologically important hardwoods such as red and white oak, maple, and locust, along with fruit-bearing species including persimmon and black cherry that support wildlife habitat and future recreational opportunities.

"Tazewell County has a proud coal heritage, and it's incredibly rewarding to bring young people out to a former mine site and show them firsthand what responsible land reclamation looks like," said Randy Moore, Virginia Energy Director of Coal Programs. "These students are seeing that the end of mining is not the end of the story — it's the beginning of a



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new chapter for the land and for the communities that depend on it. Programs like this bridge our mining past with an environmentally rich future."

Beyond tree planting, students participated in hands-on learning at interactive educational stations. Demonstrations included renewable energy technologies, a model surface mine to illustrate the coal mining process, emergency response equipment showcased by Virginia Energy's mine rescue team, and additional exhibits highlighting career pathways in the energy and natural resources sectors.

"I think this is important because we really need to know how we can affect our future and whether it's doing stuff like this and helping the earth and the planet that we live on, or if we don't know this stuff we could really affect it negatively," said Cameron Spencer, 11th grade, Richlands High School.

The initiative also advances the goals of the Appalachian Regional Reforestation Initiative, which is dedicated to restoring forests on coal-mined lands throughout the Eastern United States. The Virginia Department of Forestry donated the trees for the event.

"This is invaluable to the students. There is only so much I can do in the classroom. But having students hands-on in the field with the resources that were presented them today [...] there were just so many great things for them to take part in and learn from," said Steven England, biology and environmental science teacher at Richlands High School.

Virginia Energy was supported by community and agency partners who joined in celebrating this milestone 20th annual event. Partners include the Metallurgical Coal Producers Association, CNX, Ramaco Resources, Virginia Clean Cities, Dominion Energy, the federal Office of Surface Mining, Virginia Department of Forestry, Virginia Department of Transportation, and Richlands High School.

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