

# Land deal grows Pennsylvania preserve to 3,000 acres

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More than 3,000 acres are now included in an “undeveloped” state park in highly developed southern Chester County. White Clay Preserve climbed from its former 2,072 acres in one quick action 11 years in the making earlier this month.

The Conservation Fund, the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Mt. Cuba Center, and Chester County completed an 11-year conservation effort along Pennsylvania’s southern border with the purchase of about 978 acres of undeveloped land.

Featuring rolling farmlands, open grasslands, wooded terrain and stream corridor, the 978-acre Strawbridge property was officially transferred from The Conservation Fund to DCNR for permanent protection and management. The preservation of that tract secures a contiguous block of open recreation space of nearly 8,000 acres, one of the largest in the region.

The deal came 11 years after the protection of an adjacent 735-acre Strawbridge property, which was purchased by the Fund and transferred to DCNR in 2009. That property, now known as the Big Elk Creek section of the White Clay Creek Preserve, contains 2.1 miles of the Mason-Dixon line along the Pennsylvania/Maryland state border, joining the 5,300-acre Fair Hill Natural Resource Management Area in Maryland. Together, the three areas make up one of the largest central open spaces in the Mid-Atlantic.

“Large tracts of open space like this are extremely rare and valuable, especially in such a highly developed and populated area,” said Blaine Phillips, Mid-Atlantic regional director for The Conservation Fund. “The result is one of the largest blocks of open space in our region and an opportunity to maintain a bucolic landscape that is quickly vanishing.”

“As pressure from development, climate change and other threats pose unprecedented risks for biodiversity, one of the most important things we can do to support flora and fauna is to conserve open space and the habitats it comprises,” said Ann Rose, president of Mt. Cuba Center. “The Strawbridge property extends an important wildlife corridor and provides refuge for a wide array of rare and threatened species.

More than 690 plant species have been identified on the Strawbridge properties, 15 of which are considered state-endangered or rare in Pennsylvania. That diversity includes three varieties of orchids and a species of trillium. The land’s diverse terrain provides habitat for native wildlife species including deer, rabbits and birds, but rare species such as the regal fritillary butterfly and the short-eared owl are also known to reside here. Strawbridge supports roughly 3.5 miles of the Big Elk Creek, a tributary of the Elk River and Chesapeake Bay, which preserves critical land within the Chesapeake watershed. The land encompasses roughly 190 acres of floodplains, 600 acres of woodlands, 100 acres of native grass meadows and 800 acres of farmland.

Under DCNR’s ownership, the Strawbridge properties will be managed within the White Clay Preserve Elk Creek Unit as part of the Pennsylvania state park system, and open for public recreation.

“The park will remain largely undeveloped for some time to come. And, it will always remain a place designated for low-impact recreation, said K. Mike Redding, statewide manager for land projects and acquisitions for DCNR.

“We plan to work with local partners to develop a plan for the land and how it fits in to the landscape and adjoining open space in Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland.”

He explained, “The benefits of protecting these historic lands are multi-faceted. For those who will enjoy the park, they will be treated to passive, low-impact type of recreational activities, including hiking, biking, fishing, boating, birdwatching, hunting and exploring. For those who won’t use the park directly, the benefits are clean air and clean water that these amazing open spaces provide. There’s also the benefit to the wildlife and plant species that call this area home.

“The main attraction is the low impact recreational component itself. The quietness that a non-developed park brings has benefits for those wishing to explore nature without the development typically associated with a day-use or overnight park.”

Redding suggested, “The Springlawn Trail is a good way to get a glimpse of the park. Springlawn was once a small community that used the waters of the Big Elk Creek to turn a mill wheel. The land became part of a DuPont country estate, and trails were built under the road so that horses and riders did not have to cross the roadway. The land changed ownership when the State of Maryland created Fair Hill Natural Resources Area from the DuPont Maryland holdings, and George Strawbridge purchased his Pennsylvania lands. The ruins of Springlawn are still there and the total length of the trail is 2.5 miles. You’ll find some spurs trails that lead to Big Elk Creek from the trail.”

He stressed “The preservation of this property secures a contiguous block of open recreation space of nearly 8,000 acres, one of the largest in the region, especially in a highly developed and populated area, all less than 5 miles from Newark, Delaware, 15 miles from Wilmington, Delaware, and 34 miles from Philadelphia.”

The Conservation Fund has worked in all 50 states since 1985, protecting more than 8 million acres of land, including more than 144,000 acres of natural lands across Pennsylvania.

With paths welcoming guests from the formal gardens of a du Pont mansion through stunning vistas, intimate woodlands and lush meadows, Mt. Cuba Center in Hockessin, Delaware, is a botanical garden that puts the beauty of native landscapes on display to inspire conservation. What began in the 1930s as the private estate of Mr. and Mrs. Lammot du Pont Copeland is now a public garden that centers on the beauty and value of native plants.

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