

# NRCS REPORT

## Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts Quarterly Meeting

June 25, 2020 ♦ Teleconference

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### ASTC-Programs (ASTC-P)

#### **EQIP, CSP, RCPP, VPA-HIP, CIG, TSP and Easement Programs**

Field staff are currently managing 2,044 active conservation program contracts with our participants. These contracts represent 08 Million in financial assistance to Virginia farmers on nearly 435,779 acres.

- **Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)**

Virginia's Initial EQIP allocation for FY20 is up to 25.8 Million following the approval of the new Joint Chief's project with the U.S. Forest Service for The North Shenandoah Mountain Restoration Project. We received 1,395 applications for EQIP Financial Assistance by the February 28<sup>th</sup> application batching cutoff. This is an 18% increase in applications over FY19. More than 400 of the highest ranked applications have been preapproved and staff are currently working with our participants to get those applications to contract.

- **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)–Classic & Renewals**

The FY20 application period for CSP-Classic was announced in February and closed May 29<sup>th</sup>. NRCS received 377 applications which is a 260% increase in applications over FY19. Staff are currently assessing and ranking these applications.

- **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**

2014 Farm Bill RCPP – The application period for the existing project with TNC (RCPP-HFRP) remain open while application periods for projects with VCE (RCPP-EQIP-Franklin County Dairies) and VMRC (RCPP-EQIP-Aquaculture) have closed and preapprovals for the highest ranked applications are underway.

The RCPP-Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFAs) announcement of program funding closed May 18<sup>th</sup>. An AFA is an innovative project where the partner handles all of the Financial Assistance to producers. NRCS is responsible for the inherently governmental activities, such as Highly Erodible Land Conservation and Wetland Compliance (HEL/WC) NEPA compliance, Eligibility, etc. Applications from partners are under evaluation by our national office.

- **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)**

The ACEP allocation for FY20 is up to 1.5 Million following our request for additional funds. Virginia received 3 entity applications (4 parcels) during the FY20 signup which ended March 10<sup>th</sup>. The applications are for 1,094 acres requesting 2.1 Million. Applications are being evaluated and ranked. Concurrently, we are managing various stages of 7 existing prior year enrollments in ACEP-ALE.

- **Voluntary Public Access – Habitat Incentives Program (VPA-HIP)**

NRCS Awarded a VPA-HIP grant of more than 2.9 Million to Virginia's Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF). The DGIF is one of 27 recipients in 27 states receiving awards through this competitive grant program that offers funding to state and tribal governments to

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expand or improve public access to private lands for wildlife-dependent recreation. DGIF will focus its efforts in the Coalfields region of Southwest Virginia to not only expand the acres in its existing Public Access Lands for Sportsmen (PALS) program but also encompass a wider variety of wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities and provide incentive payments to landowners for wildlife conservation activities and public access to parcels that offer new opportunities for hunting, fishing, trapping or wildlife-dependent recreation. We are in the latter stages of executing this new agreement

- **Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)**

The management of the CIG program in Virginia will now be headed by Debbie Bullock. Debbie was the District Conservationist in our Warsaw Service Center and was recently hired for a promotion to a Virginia NRCS state program manager. We currently have 17 active state CIG agreements with many partners in the Commonwealth.

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### **Engineering (SCE)**

#### **Dam Rehabilitation**

- **Upper North River 77** – Construction is complete. Contract and administrative closeout is underway.
- **Beaver Creek 1** – It is anticipated that the agreement to obligate the planning funds with the Rivanna Water and Sewer Authority will be signed in early July. This will be a locally led planning effort with NRCS providing review and approval of the supplemental watershed plan prepared by Rivanna Water and Sewer Authority. The planning period will take 18 to 24 months.

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### **State Resource Conservationist (SRC)**

#### **Technical Tools (Field Office Technical Guide)**

- Posted new Resource Concerns Fact Sheets (FOTG Notice 450-20-474).
- Posted updated CPPE and RMS Planning Tool (FOTG Notice 450-20-473).
- Posted updated Wetland JAA (FOTG Notice 450-20-472).
- Posted new Conservation Planning Training Tool (FOTG Notice 450-20-471).
- Posted updated Conservation Practice Standards and Job Sheets (FOTG Notice 450-20-470).
  - Alley Cropping (Code 311), Feed Management (Code 592), Firebreak (Code 394), Forest Trails and Landings (Code 655), Forest Stand Improvement (Code 666), Integrated Pest Management (Code 595), Integrated Pest Management–Apple Peach (Code 595), Nutrient Management (Code 590), Prescribed Burning (Code 338), Restoration and Management of Rare or Declining Habitat (Code 643), Riparian Forest Buffer (Code 391), Tree/Shrub Establishment (Code 612), Tree/Shrub Site Prep (Code 490), Woody Residue Treatment (Code 384)
- Posted revised Pasture Condition Scoring Sheet (FOTG Notice 450-20-469).
- Posted new Technical Note on Pocosins (FOTG Notice 450-20-468).
- Began revision and drafting of a new State Offsite Wetland Mitigation policy and Scope & Effect Drainage Guide document.

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- Led discussion between VA NRCS and NHQ Soil Health Division on soil health related needs and projects. Included identifying specific opportunities for NHQ SHD to help VA NRCS, including review of documents, CIG opportunities, etc.
  - Developing Technical Note with specific definition of Soil Health Management Systems (SHMS) customized for VA NRCS use, on-going.
  - Developing Tech Note on crop rotation diagraming & analysis for use with 328 and other practices, on-going.
  - Partnered with NRCS Ft. Worth Tech Center staff to update STIR calculator tool for use with above two Tech Notes.
- Initiated comparing the nationally revised prescribed burn policy vs VA existing prescribed burn policy, preparing state supplement.
- Working on adopting a new practice for Virginia, Wildlife Habitat Planting (CPS 420), and job sheet for Virginia, resulting in the ability of planners to use for FY21.
- Initiated review of all wildlife/biology related material throughout the entire Plant Establishment Guide for relevancy to keep, move to another more appropriate place within FOTG or remove entirely and archive.
- Working on developing plant field id guides (common pasture plants and invasive plants) to distribute to field staff which will result in planners being better prepared to identify desirable and undesirable plants within a pasture.
- Developed new CRP practices and recommendations for Management Activities per new policy outlined in 2CRP.
- Developed an updated 2020 VA NRCS State Soil Health Strategic Plan. Coordinated with staff as well as up to a dozen key partners in developing this important document that helps lay out plan of action and priorities for future VA NRCS soil health activities.

#### **Training to Field Staff**

- Conducted a series of weekly webinars in March and April to provide updates on the new assessment tools with CART and allow adequate time for Q&A. Providing updated Virginia FAQ's for common Q&A's from field staff.
- Prepared CART spreadsheet that populates assessment questions per land use and resource concern and state level guidance. This gives planners the questions they need to determine prior to making field.
- Continued to respond to requests for assistance with CD and CART as field staff progressed through assessment, ranking and preparation for obligation for FA program applications.
- Continue to update statewide layers for use in planning and assessing resources on the NRCS Geoportal.
- Conducted four webinar style April JEDs on updates with Soil Health activities and the updated Pasture Condition Scoring.
- Joint agency (FSA, NRCS, DOF, DCR) CRP teleconference held June 2<sup>nd</sup> for all agency field staff.
  - Released bulletin 180-20-3\_CRP Guidance.
  - Released bulletin 180-20-4\_CRP CD/CART Guidance.
  - Released bulletin 180-20-5\_CRP Grasslands Guidance.
- Completed the 2020 training for our 14 NRI Field Data Collectors and administered the written test to complete the training, review and documentation requirements to begin the data collection season.

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- At request of Area IV, assisted with planning, registration, and implementation of March 12 Area IV JED at David Hula's Renwood Farms.
- Provided a presentation about the Technical and Financial Assistance Available to Producers for Novel Fescue Conversion, to 35 participants at the state Novel Tall Fescue Renovation Workshop in Middleburg, VA.

#### **Customer Service and Outreach**

- Oversaw the planting of the replicated native warm season grass variety trial including a total of 20 different varieties of 4 species of native grasses at the SPAREC as part of the CIG project.
- Oversaw and approved the case study summary of Keith Tuck establishing switchgrass through the Working Lands for Wildlife program to balance his forage production over the growing season as part of Dr. Pents' CIG project.
- Reviewed the successful establishment of a fescue conversion to novel endophyte including fertilization and weed control for a CIG project.
  - Reviewed, revised and approved 6 fact sheets on fescue toxicosis, management and renovation to novel endophyte developed by Dr. John Fike as a deliverable on the fescue conversion CIG project.
- Scheduled and coordinated a photo shoot with a local farmer and Public Affairs to get needed photos of cattle grazing native warm season grasses for needed displays and promotional materials for the WLFW program.
- Worked with Public Affairs on developing a blog with Farm Credit Knowledge Center on what NRCS resources are available to the public.
- Participated as the National Liaison for the Alliance for Grassland Renewal to build the coalition with his partner in an effort to expand our services and achieve common goals.
- Attended and helped carry out first small-scale Shenandoah Valley farmer discussion session ("No-till Chat 'N Chew Meetings") to kick off VANTAGE's implementation of NFWF grant.
- Helped set up and lead first implementation planning meeting to coordinate partner efforts for NFWF-funded VA Tech state-wide soil health promotion project.
- Developed new Compliance website per national bulletin working with Public affairs to provide transparent, consistent and clear information to clients.
- Initiated Zoom calls with VA Tech and DCR contacts on soil health assessment – first meeting of its kind – as next step in building consensus around this topic.
- Coordinating with VA Tech, NRCS NHQ, and VA NRCS to establish two partnership agreements that will use competitive grant as well as VA NRCS funds to establish an innovative partnership staffing strategy and embedded "Integrated Conservation Agronomy" (ICA) staff.

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#### **State Soil Scientist (SSS)**

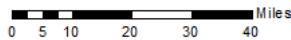
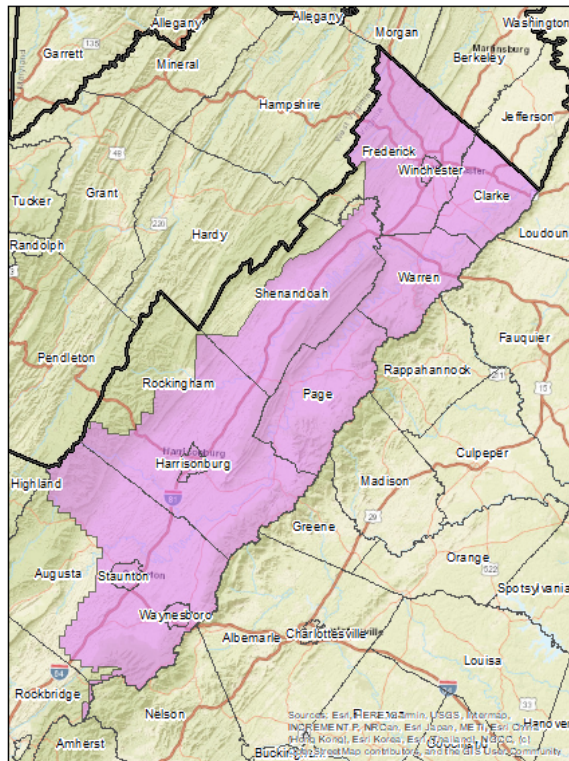
##### **LiDAR acquisition**

Below will be flown for new QL2 lidar next fall in cooperation with FEMA, NFS, and USGS.


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VA\_NorthernShenandoah\_2020\_D20



**Legend**

 VA\_NorthernShenandoah\_UTM17\_2020\_DPA

NRI Grazing land data collection is currently underway across the state.

Every Soil Survey Dataset (108) has been uploaded to a Staging Server with new soil interpretations. This data will soon be available on the Web Soil Survey.

The Northeast Cooperative Soil Survey Conference is ongoing the week of June 22<sup>nd</sup> virtually. The last one which occurred in Virginia was in the year 2000.

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**Public Affairs (PAS)**

**Outreach/Public Affairs**

**COVID-19.** Released [video message](#) to Virginia farmers to highlight staff availability to serve customers while offices remain closed to the public and shared regular updates from USDA agencies via social media. Also highlighted Tappahannock efforts to sustain customer service in an [FPAC blog post](#).

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**Minority Farmer Recognition.** Soliciting nominations for Virginia NRCS Civil Rights Advisory Committee's 2020 Farmer of the Year to be recognized at the Virginia Small Farm Conference.

**NRCS in the News.** Prepared [quest blog](#) on NRCS programs and services for Farm Credit of Virginia's Knowledge Center. Posted on April 27, the spotlight highlighted the importance of conservation planning and was featured in the agency's national news clips.

**Smith Creek Showcase Watershed.** Disseminated new [Smith Creek newsletter](#) on April 24 to highlight landowner champions and team initiatives to support local water quality improvements. Began planning a 10th anniversary celebration to be held at Valley Pike Farm (Lohr family farm). The Lord Fairfax and Shenandoah Valley SWCDs have been strong partners and will be included in coordination for the October event.

#### **Earth Team Program**

Featured district Earth Team award winners in web spotlights and digital bulletins for **National Volunteer Week** (April 19-25). Recognized all active individual volunteers and groups with presentation items and a thank you letter from the State Conservationist. Welcomed Quinton DC Peggy Shaw-McBee as the new field liaison to the Earth Team Advisory Committee meeting on June 9 (replaces Debbie Bullock who joined the Programs team in May). Notified team that the national office has named a new executive program manager and program coordinator who are developing a plan for an FPAC-wide volunteer program that will include FSA and RMA.

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#### **Admin (ASTC-M&S)**

#### **VA NRCS Personnel Changes**

##### *Pathways Conversions, effective 3/1/2020*

Sarah Adinolfi – Lebanon – going to Christiansburg

Brad Carter – Accomac

Tara Ciavarella – Amelia – going to Charlotte Court House

Eva Rondon - Richmond

##### *Retirements*

Jack Bricker, State Conservationist, Richmond, 5/31/20

Stuart Ward, Soil Con Technician, Charlotte Court House, 5/31/20

##### *Positions Vacated*

Debbie Bullock, District Conservationist, Warsaw, 5/22/20

Harvey Baker, District Conservationist, Emporia, 6/5/20

Kelley Smith, District Conservationist, Bedford, 6/20/20

Jeffrey Barr, District Conservationist, Warrenton, 6/20/20

Matthew Wescott, Soil Conservationist, Courtland, 6/20/20

Phillip Davis, Area Resource Conservationist, Harrisonburg, 6/24/20

Derek Hancock, District Conservationist, Farmville, 7/3/20

Rachel Loveday, District Conservationist, Amelia, 7/3/20