

Division of Soil and Water Conservation
Division Director's Report

December 7, 2020

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Madam President, members of the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts Board, please accept this Soil and Water Conservation Division Report.

Agricultural BMP Surveys

A farmer survey will soon be distributed to farmers and ranchers in Virginia's Chesapeake Bay Watershed with a goal to achieve a more complete inventory of agricultural best management practices (BMPs) that could be, but are not currently, credited in the EPA Chesapeake Bay Model for nutrient reductions. A similar survey has been conducted by Pennsylvania twice within the last five years. Virginia's survey was developed over many months by members of Virginia's Voluntary Agricultural Best Management Practices Task Force. Task force members worked closely together and include representatives from the: Office of the Secretary of Natural Resources (OSNR), Natural Resources Conservation Service, Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Virginia Agribusiness Council, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (Department), Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, Virginia Department of Forestry, Virginia Farm Bureau, US Environmental Protection Agency, and Virginia Tech Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) will distribute the survey early next year and will request responses by early March. VCE agents will then be trained by Department staff in April/May to conduct BMP verification inspections for quality control. VCE will do so on 10% of the survey respondents. The Department will receive the raw BMP data from VCE, compare and deduplicate it with the data in the AgBMP tracking module, and aggregate it to the county level before submitting it, along with the normal Department data, for Chesapeake Bay Model credit.

In addition, the Department will initiate another conservation tillage/residue survey in spring 2021. Districts will again be offered supplemental grant agreements and compensated to conduct this “windshield” survey. A cover crop survey is also being planned for next winter.

Additional BMP Verification

The Department and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) have entered into a Memorandum of Agreement to share location information on specified types of federally funded, expired and expiring BMPs in Virginia’s Chesapeake Bay watershed, where producers authorize sharing of this data in writing. A letter developed jointly by the Department and NRCS, which invites producers to participate, will be mailed soon. Districts will be asked to conduct BMP verification inspections for willing participants and to offer them a Voluntary BMP Authorization form, a CCI (Continuing Conservation Initiative) cost share application, or a Resource Management Plan cost share application. Any data obtained will be both aggregated to county level prior to submission and reported to NRCS annually for their review of practice lifespans.

Chesapeake Bay Bill Update

As you know, the Virginia General Assembly passed, and Governor Northam signed into state law, an amended version of HB1422/SB704. This law requires:

- Development of an (office) method for determining perennial streams by Dec. 2020
- Establishment of a portable livestock stream exclusion fencing specification by July 2021
- OSNR to appoint a stakeholder group to develop plan for nutrient management plan adoption on cropland >50 acres, and stream exclusion if 20+ cattle, and monitor to progress made towards these goals. (This Stakeholder group membership is largely defined by the bill and includes District representation via the VASWCD).

Progress continues to be made implementing the Bay Bill’s provisions. The Bay Bill Stakeholder Group held its first meeting in August. Their next meeting will be held this week. Guidance on an (office) method for identifying perennial streams without

field verification was published in the Virginia Register on November 9 for public comment through December 9. An informational webinar about this guidance was hosted by the Department on November 5. This guidance will be voted on for adoption by the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board (Board) at their virtual meeting on December 16.

The Stream Protection/Forestry Subcommittee, of the Agricultural Best Management Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), developed a portable livestock stream exclusion fencing specification. The full TAC held its only vote of this year via an electronic meeting on November 4 to advance this BMP specification to the Board as part of the FY2022 Cost Share Manual at the Board's spring 2021 meetings.

The Department's Direct Pay Agricultural Nutrient Management Plan Program, which is partially funded by a supplemental Chesapeake Bay Program Grant, is performing well, enrolling 29 private sector planners and resulting in over 50,000 planned acres as of early November. The Whole Farm Approach (WFA), which requires nutrient management plans in order to participate, has been an exceptionally successful pilot project in Three Rivers SWCD. WFA will be expanded via another supplemental Chesapeake Bay Grant to the Chesapeake Bay side of the Eastern Shore SWCD. This supplemental grant will also help address significant erosion on agricultural land within the Great Wicomico watershed on the Northern Neck. Additional funding to expand WFA to additional areas within the Chesapeake Bay watershed is being pursued with Thomas Jefferson SWCD, through the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program Grant.

The Department is also developing a Small Herd Initiative to incentivize livestock stream exclusion practices in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. If approved by the Board for the FY2022 program year, operations with at least 20 but no more than 35 head of cattle will be able to qualify. As currently conceived, qualified participants could receive up to \$25,000, non-competitively, for any livestock stream exclusion practice included in the FY22 Cost Share Manual without an impact on their annual VACS cap for other practices.

Ag BMP Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) Update

The Department has completed webinars scheduled to inform Agricultural Best Management Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) subcommittee members of the Department's recommendations to address the suggestions received for the FY22 program year. After receiving and reviewing written comments from webinar attendees, a final webinar will be held for the full TAC on December 17 at which

time all of the Department's recommendations for consideration by the Board for the FY2022 program year will be summarized. Final recommendations will be presented to the Board at their spring 2021 meetings.

Staffing and Recruitment

The Division of Soil and Water Conservation recently promoted Marissa Roland to the Conservation District Coordinator position in our Tappahannock Office. The vacant Urban Nutrient Management Program Coordinator position has closed. Interviews will be scheduled in the near future.