

NRCS REPORT
Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts Quarterly Meeting
April 14, 2021 ♦ Virtual

ASTC-Programs (ASTC-P)

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

Field staff are currently managing 2,106 active conservation program contracts with our participants. These contracts represent \$ \$117,777,140 million in financial assistance to Virginia farmers on nearly 455,058 acres.

- **Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)**
Received 1,208 EQIP applications submitted by the Dec. 18 deadline, a 17% increase over those received in FY20.

- **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)–Classic, Renewals & GCI**
Obligated \$3.2 million for 45 CSP renewals with 2 in approved status. Total obligation of \$3.6 million on 24,387 acres represents a 67% increase in funding, a 51% increase in contracts obligated and a 48% increase in acres enrolled over FY20. Also funded 15 CSP-GCI-1 contracts for \$43,090.

Completed 1,065 CSP Renewals, Classic, and GCI payments totaling \$1,848,245 for 444 participants.

- **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**
Reviewed and evaluated 5 RCPP Classic proposals for 3 state/multi-state and 2 CCA projects. Awaiting funding announcement for recommended projects.

- **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)**
Closed 2 ALE easements on 197 acres in Loudoun and Stafford counties and initiated 4 new applications with funding requests for \$5.4 million on 1,767 acres. Also moving forward with 1 WRE application on 1,000 acres (the largest of its type in VA, if funded).

- **Voluntary Public Access – Habitat Incentives Program (VPA-HIP)**
Coordinating with VA Dept. of Wildlife Resources on FY21 launch of new VPA-HIP project focused in Southwest Virginia’s Coalfields region.

- **Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)**
Offering \$300K for state CIG focused on research, demonstrations, outreach, and educational initiatives to advance adoption of soil health management practices in the Commonwealth (awaiting final review/release).

Engineering (SCE)

Dam Rehabilitation

- **Beaver Creek 1** The planning effort is being locally led by the Sponsor, Rivanna Water and Sewer Authority (RWSA). RWSA has retained Schnabel Engineering as their consultant. A virtual environmental agency scoping, and a public participation meeting was held in December. The planning process is ongoing. The planning period will take 18 to 24 months. Project is on schedule.
 - **Upper North River 77** (Augusta Co.) – Construction and financial close-out complete.
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State Resource Conservationist (SRC)

Technical Tools (Field Office Technical Guide)

- Revised “VA CART Questions Quick Reference Spreadsheet” to incorporate changes for FY21 as a resource for staff to help appropriately select resource concerns, land uses and assessment questions
- Continued compilation of “VA CART FAQs” document begun in FY20 with updates as needed from webinar Q&A sessions, emails, etc.
- Developed two VA Business Tools Guide Sheets:
 - Land Use and Modifier Definitions and Modifiers in CART
 - Surface Water Features in CART
- Updated NRCS-CPA-52 and CPTT to incorporate EA references, posted to the FOTG
- Issued bulletins to keep staff current with CRP and providing contract information to field staff for required status reviews
- Reviewed national Prescribed Burn Policy revisions and finalized the VA state supplement
- Provided final FY21 WHET tool and FOTG notice updating the wildlife resource concerns
- Updated 6 grazing planning support documents and VA-GRAZ tool used in the planning process and posted to the FOTG
- Wetland Scope and Effect procedures for VA reviewed by the STC, no comments received, posted to the FOTG
- Farmed Wetland indicators reviewed by the STC, provided response to comments, ready for FR posting nationally

Training to Field Staff

- Covid-19 training and travel restrictions challenged the team to forage new opportunities to conducted Joint Employee Development (JED) trainings to strength and expand NRCS and partner employee’s knowledge and skills. Utilizing weekly SRC webinars in place of traditional in-person meetings allowed us to disseminate information quickly and efficiently to field staff. These training sessions resulted in approximately 2,324 field staff and 1,975 partners being trained in 36 different training opportunities.
- FY2020 CART ‘Lessons learned’ from analysis of assessments override data, how to producer better maps, etc.
- Rollout of FY2021 CART updates, releases, and new features.
- Certified planner trainings (RUSLE, PCS, SVAP, WHET, Basic Soils, HEL/WC).
- Technical Trainings (compliance, prescribed burn awareness, grazing training, cover crop basics, etc.).
- Joint agency trainings organized with VASWCD (Pasture Condition Score, Grazing Plan Development, Erosion Fundamentals & RUSLE2, Cover Crop Fundamentals).
- Joint agency Virginia Farm Voluntary Ag BMP Survey Training.
- Joint agency (FSA, NRCS, DCR, DOF) CRP call on updates and an overview of the new FMI program.
- Presented with the National Grazing Lands Team on a national webinar on CIG successful grazing lands implementation.
- Presented on national WLFW Northern Bobwhite Partnership two-day meeting highlighting VA’s successful strategy developing, promoting, and supporting the WLFW program.
- Novel Tall Fescue Renovation Three-day Workshop on utilizing the conservation planning process to support pasture renovation with novel endophyte fescue and using financial assistance in the process.

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- Partnered with VFGC, VCE, CBF and the forage industry to conduct the virtual winter forage conference. This was 5 separate events, topics around the theme Building Resilience in Grass Based Farms.

Customer Service and Outreach

Helped train, coordinate, and facilitate 7 partnership outreach events where over 1,611 participants attended. These outreach events strive to strengthen and expand NRCS partnership activities to achieve common goals, address critical resource concerns and accelerate conservation.

- Led the wildlife portion of VT's Fall Forestry and Wildlife Tour at Sandy Point State Forest, resulting in 30 LO's being more aware of wildlife habitat and the availability of NRCS TA/FA for creating wildlife habitat on private lands.
- Participated in Virginia's semi-annual Longleaf Cooperators meeting. Resulting in NRCS being kept up to date on the latest news, progress, and developments on Longleaf pine establishment and maintenance in Virginia.
- Presented to a national audience of 175 participants during the Working Lands for Wildlife: Northern Bobwhite, Grasslands and Savannas National Partnership Meeting, highlighting VA's successful strategy for developing, promoting, and supporting the WLFW Bobwhite quail program.
- Presented to a regional audience at the Virtual Novel Endophyte Fescue Workshops to an audience of 108 farmers on how to utilize the conservation planning process to support pasture renovation with novel endophyte fescue and using financial assistance in the process.
- Partnered with VFGC, VCE, CBF and the forage industry to conduct the virtual winter forage conference. Five separate events with various topics around the theme Building Resilience in Grass Based Farms. Total participation for the 5 days was 1,521 attended. 4.0 nutrient management CEU's and 6.0 CEU's for Certified Crop Advisors were offered.
- Partnered with the National Grazing Lands Team to plan and conduct a national webinar titled, 'Conservation Innovation Grants: Successful Grazing Lands - Innovation to Implementation, where 190 people participated from 42 states plus DC and Pakistan. Demonstrated with farmer testimony how Virginia NRCS worked as a team to integrate findings into technical recommendations, program offerings and promotions to help get more native grasses planted on working lands.
- Met with the planning team at Virginia State University Randolph Farm to go over the pasture renovation and grazing demonstration establishment plan to get on track for a timeline of success for 2021 and provided technical recommendations for seed orders and timing of planting.
- Led the coordination and development of the 2021 VA Grazers' Planner, a very effective outreach tool to grassland farmers. 3,500 copies were distributed through our offices and partner organizations across the state.
- Helping prepare VA NRCS for shift to greater emphasis in our soil health work on carbon sequestration and climate issues. Examples include:
 - Helped identify and coordinate participation by three VA NRCS employees in carbon farm planning training in NC funded in part by NRCS-VA Tech outreach grant. This includes training on COMET.
 - Provided assistance to external partners interested in C sequestration and soil-based strategies for climate change mitigation. This includes serving as opening speaker on Citizen's Climate Education Regenerative Ag Forum.

Participated in 7 different soil health events where NRCS organized outreach and training with partners and was a keynote presenter. This included 1,583 agency staff, partners, industry, and producers learning and sharing together, a key feature of the VA Soil Health Initiative. Since the 2013 Soil Health Kickoff event in VA, NRCS has helped organize and lead 287 soil health events which were attended by over 25,423 participants and heard the NRCS principles on soil health.

- Soil Health & Integrated Conservation Agronomy (ICA) technical staffing & capacity-building:

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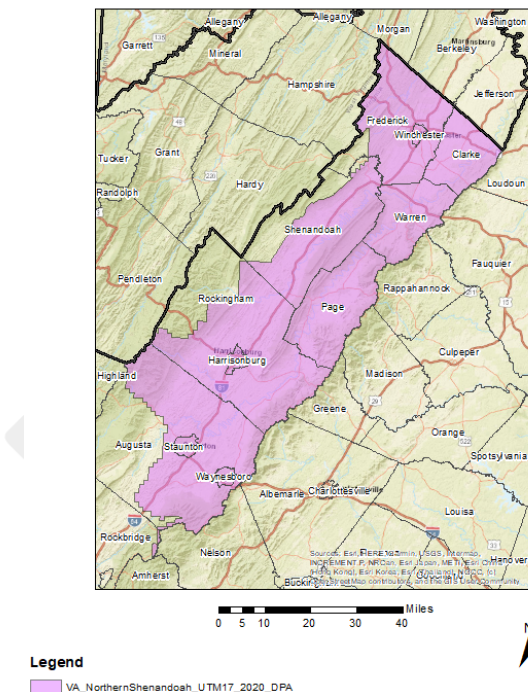
- Began implementation of NRCS NHQ-VA Tech agreement that will add new partnership-funded, NRCS-embedded ICA Specialist to SRC team.
- Other core element of above project: Hiring of paid farmer mentors to work with both farmer customers and new staff.
- VA Soil Health Coalition (VSHC) Coordinator & structure/function planning:
 - Worked extensively with new VSHC Coordinator Mary Sketch to help her understand VA NRCS needs & perspectives on soil health promotion & implementation.
 - This on-going effort has also involved discussions with VA Tech/VCE, VASWCD, VABF, and DCR partners.
- Soil Health outreach & messaging:
 - Developed and presented for internal review new materials and messaging for VA NRCS soil health campaign designed to both refresh and refocus our outreach internally and align with efforts of partners such as VCE's "4TheSoil".
- Soil Health assessment & measurement:
 - Implementing in systematic fashion a shift to greater emphasis on soil health assessment (SHA) within VA NRCS. Focusing on a "from the bottom-up" approach involving discussion with selected VA NRCS FO staff to ensure what we are doing is both meaningful and manageable for our end users.
 - Identified and implemented opportunity to hire Carl Peacock as ACES to assist with SHA needs.
- Provided assistance to DCR in drafting ideas for VACS Soil Health BMP.

State Soil Scientist (SSS)

LiDAR acquisition

Below has been flown for new QL2 lidar this month in cooperation with FEMA, NFS and USGS. Quality assurance process has begun.

VA_NorthernShenandoah_2020_D20



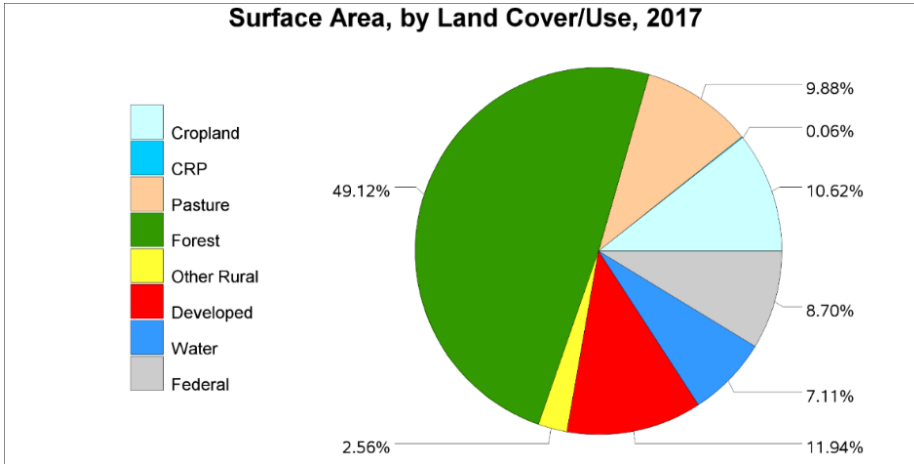
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National Resources Inventory Update

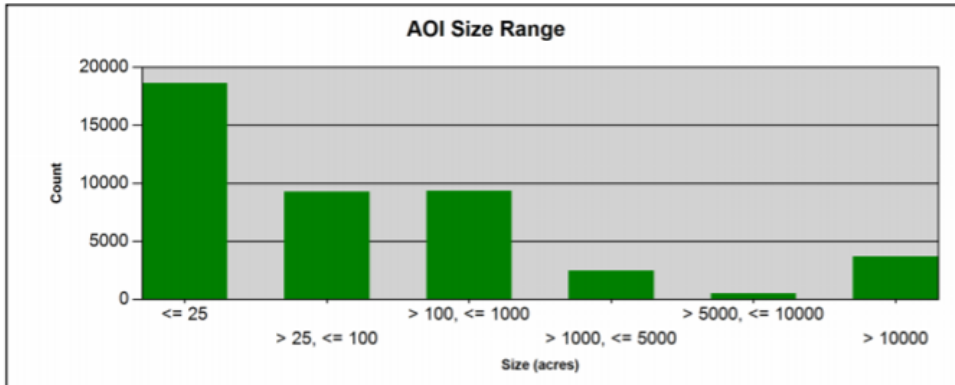
- NRI Grazing land data collection is about to begin across the state for FY21's collection period.
- NRI Local Data collection has been completed for FY19 and was completed in January.
- 2017 NRI data summaries were published this early Fall for use by planners.
<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/rca/national/technical/nra/rca/ida/>



Soil Survey Update

- Held multiple technical team and management team meetings with Virginia's MLRA project leaders for soil survey update projects occurring in the state in FY21. The review process has begun prior to the June refresh upload date of all 108 VA soil survey areas to the web soil survey.
- Virginia created 44,003 separate Area of Interests (AOI) on the Web Soil Survey in the first two months of NRCS's 2021 Fiscal Year, stretching the NRCS customer base very far and wide.

Web Soil Survey, AOI Size Range Report Created 3/26/2021; 11:22:35 AM
Start Date: 10/1/2020 End Date: 3/20/2021 State/Territory: Virginia



Size Range (acres)	Count
<= 25	18660
> 25, <= 100	9275
> 100, <= 1000	9363
> 1000, <= 5000	2462
> 5000, <= 10000	531
> 10000	3712
Total:	44003

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Public Affairs (PAS)

Outreach/Public Affairs

Conservation at Work. Coordinating national video shoots at three Shenandoah Valley farms (one in Page County and two in Berryville) for a Virginia “Conservation at Work” video. These short features shine the spotlight on producers across the U.S. who share their conservation stories and how practices are helping them protect resources while saving time and money. (View existing videos here: <https://www.farmers.gov/conserve/conservation-at-work>)

NRCS in the News. Released profile on Franklin County cattleman David Bridges who is seeking to recreate Woodmont, a Western Maryland hunting lodge and game preserve, on a 261-acre farm near Callaway. Distributed the feature through our digital communications platform (govDelivery) and to a targeted list of Roanoke area media, generating interest from WXFR TV (FOX). Also shared the spotlight with counterparts in Maryland. [View the story map.](#)

Soil Health Partnerships/Networking. Joined Representative Abigail Spanberger and Virginia Delegate Rodney Willett for the Citizens’ Climate Education - Virginia Regenerative Agriculture Forum of Feb. 4. Cropland Agronomist Chris Lawrence participated in the virtual panel discussion on moving Virginia agriculture forward with special emphasis on increasing yield and profit to strengthen rural economies, new practices and technologies, obstacles and opportunities and how elected officials can help. Nearly 300 viewers logged in for this forum, which also included discussion on [Kiss the Ground](#) documentary and the Soil Health Institute’s [Living Soil](#) film.

Social Media Engagement. Between Dec. 1 and April 8, posted **48** tweets to the @NRCS_VA account, gaining **20** new followers and garnering **3,086** visits. Top tweet for the period: VCE landowner survey promo.

Winter Meetings. Helped highlight the benefits of **building resilience in grass-based farms** through the 2021 VFGC Virtual Winter Forage Conference on Jan. 18 – 22, which averaged 250 participants/day.

Earth Team Program

Held virtual award presentation for 2020 Outstanding Individual Volunteer award recipient Keith Thomas on March 11 at the Harrisonburg office with Megen Dalton from the SVSWCD in attendance. Participating in April 19 virtual meeting to introduce SWCD staff and directors to the NRCS Area Volunteer Coordinators and outline the many benefits of participating in the Earth Team Program to track hours and recognize participants. (Special thanks to Bonnie Mahl for coordinating this activity.) Forwarding state conservationist letters and tokens of appreciation to district partners across the state in celebration of National Volunteer Week, April 18-24.

Admin (ASTC-M&S)

Virginia NRCS Personnel Changes

Retirements:

Jane Corson-Lassiter, District Conservationist, Accomac, 3/27/2021

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Upcoming Retirements:

Tom Smith, District Conservationist, Wytheville
Dan Yancey, District Conservationist, Rustburg

Positions Vacated/Moved:

Qadree Willis, Soil Conservationist, Warsaw, 1/15/2021
Patrick Vincent, Programs Specialist, State Office; moved to ASTC-Programs, State Office, 1/2/2021
Brian Wooden, District Conservationist, Hanover; moved to Fredericksburg, 3/15/2021
Mike Combs, District Conservationist, Gloucester; moved to Quinton, 3/15/2021

Personnel Added:

Austin Hunt, Economist, State Office, 2/1/2021
Samantha Peterson, Soil Conservationist, Chatham, 2/1/2021
Adam McKnight, Soil Conservationist, Harrisonburg, 2/1/2021
Vladimir Sanjurjo, CET, State Office, 2/28/21