

Division of Soil and Water Conservation
Division Director's Report

April 14, 2021

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

Agricultural BMP Surveys

A survey was circulated electronically to farmers and ranchers in Virginia's Chesapeake Bay Watershed. This survey was a multi-agency and Agribusiness endeavor 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. The number of responses was less than hoped for. Data from the survey will be verified by Virginia Cooperative Extension, then deduplicated by the Department, reaggregated to the county level, and comingled with Department data before submission to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Chesapeake Bay Model for nutrient reduction credit.

A tillage/residue survey has been postponed a year, until Spring 2022, due to concerns from several Chesapeake Bay Districts about compliance with COVID-19 safety protocols and insufficient time to obtain landowner permission for access to their properties before the survey would need to be conducted. As a result, the cover crop survey planned for next winter is also likely to be delayed. The EPA has indicated it understands the need for the delay.

NRCS and DCR in Virginia have signed a data sharing agreement. NRCS has agreed to share participant information for producers who have participated in NRCS programs where participants installed any one of 11 specific conservation practices that are at or beyond expected lifespans. Through grant agreements with the Department, funded by a supplemental Chesapeake Bay Grant, Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) will be contracted to contact participants and request to make field visits to verify these practices are still in place, evaluate them

for meeting standards and specifications, and to see if they are still functioning adequately. SWCDs will offer these producers either a state Voluntary BMP Authorization Form, a Resource Management Plan application, or state cost share via a Continuing Conservation Initiative (CCI) application for BMP maintenance. SWCDs may also identify any new resource concerns and could then follow up with the participant for potential conservation solutions and a revised conservation plan. Practices that are still in place and functioning, although outside of their normal lifespan, will be recorded so that they may be entered into DCR's Conservation Application Suite (tracking system) and receive a renewed credit duration lifespan in the Chesapeake Bay Model. Data will be shared with NRCS via the Department after field reviews are complete so that NRCS can evaluate the effectiveness of those practices at achieving the goals and solving resource concerns as set forth in conservation plans.

Chesapeake Bay Bill Update

As required by the "Bay Bill," the Department has developed, and the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board (Board) adopted an (office) method for determining perennial streams. The Agricultural Best Management Practice Technical Advisory Committee (Ag BMP TAC) has recommended a portable livestock stream exclusion fencing BMP practice specification that will be voted on by the Board, at their upcoming meeting on April 21, and if approved will become available in July.

The Board also approved up to \$2 million, with \$260,000 in technical assistance, from unobligated funds returned by Districts to the Department, to fund a new Small Herd Initiative that will also take effect in July 2021. Agricultural producers, in designated SWCDs, who own at least 20 but no more than 35 head of cattle will be able to qualify. Splitting of herds will not be allowed. Qualified participants can receive up to \$25,000, non-competitively, on a first-come, first-served basis, for any livestock stream exclusion practice included in the FY22 Cost Share Manual without an impact on their annual cost share participant cap for other practices.

Agricultural BMP TAC

Recently relaxed gathering limits for COVID-19 safety, effective April 1, 2021, will enable the Ag BMP TAC to hold in-person subcommittee meetings this summer. It is yet to be determined whether in person full TAC meetings can be held during 2021. Twenty-two suggestions for potential changes to the Virginia Agricultural Cost Share

(VACS) Program have been deferred until in-person subcommittee meetings resume. Fourteen suggestions were tabled and twelve have been advanced by the Department to the Soil and Water Conservation Board (Board) for their consideration during their spring meetings. In recent years, the program has introduced higher participant caps, implemented several additional stream exclusion options, introduced the inclusion of buffer payments for wide buffers, developed a new suite of Continuing Conservation Initiative (CCI) BMP maintenance payments, expanded animal waste specifications with four new ones (including one for livestock in confinement for the first time), increased cover crop cost-share rates, added new specialty crop options and provided a variety of other new VACS specifications for nutrient management and vegetative cover.

For fiscal year 2022, the Soil and Water Conservation Board is reviewing for approval the legislatively mandated WP-2P Portable Fencing specification, the raising of annual participant caps to \$150,000, the loosening of VACS eligibility requirements (reducing from 5 years to 3 years of farming on the land offered in the application), expansion of the SL-7 Extension of Watering Systems practice, and revisions to cover crop planting dates. If these items are approved by the Board, the VACS Program will have more options and more flexibility for conservation-minded farmers than ever before, putting them in a better position to succeed in meeting water quality goals.

Conservation Planning Certification

In February, the Department provided the Virginia Agricultural BMP and Cost Share course as part of the Conservation Planning Certification Program. Sixteen attendees received the training that provided an introduction, overview, and operational information about the Virginia Agricultural Cost Share program and VACS Manual.

In January, the Department offered the DCR Conservation Planning Course. It was attended by 41 people from a number of Soil and Water Conservation Districts. This was the final course that most of these participants in the DCR Conservation Planning Certification Program needed before developing their own conservation plan for an on-site review by the Department. Provided conservation plans are submitted in time, the Department's Conservation Planning and Training Coordinator will be traveling throughout Virginia to review the nearly 30 District staff seeking a field review of their conservation plan in order to complete their DCR

Conservation Planning Certification. These field visits will take place from March through June. For more information on the field visit schedule or DCR Conservation Planning, visit <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/soil-and-water/conservation-planning>

FY23 District Budget Template

This year, the District Budget Template (Attachment D) Peer Review Committee, made up of one representative from each of the six District Association areas, has proposed two updates to the template. One update involves projections of future administrative support needs; the other will capture staffing demand related to dam rehabilitation projects. Before this new version of the template went to the Board for approval, the Department solicited comments from Districts. Following the review of Districts' comments, the updated template document was approved by the Board at their March 16th meeting. The template spreadsheet and instructions will be sent to all Districts soon. A virtual training on the Budget Template will be held on May 4; the registration link is available on the Association's training website. Each District's completed budget template is due to the Department by July 15.

Small Farm Outreach Project

The FY22 state budget includes \$250,000 for an outreach project by Virginia State University Small Farm Outreach Program (VSU-SFOP). The purpose of this two-year project is to encourage greater participation by farmers of color in cost share and other Department funded programs. This project will be conducted in 52 counties across Virginia, in both the Chesapeake Bay and Southern Rivers watersheds. The project will involve training of SFOP staff on Department Programs in May, followed by preparation and distribution of (potentially multi-lingual) outreach materials, outreach workshops and field days with groups of farmers, and up to three hundred on-farm visits for one-on-one outreach. This project is just one of the efforts that the Department will be implementing to meet the provisions of WIP Task #14. A joint Letter of Agreement on WIP Task #14 between the Virginia Secretaries of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Forestry, Education, and the President of the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts on November 9, 2020, commits several state agencies and the Association to work collaboratively primarily on training, outreach, and recognition, to "advance the goals of the (Chesapeake Bay) WIP and the ability of agricultural producers to achieve production needs with assistance through better coordination and delivery of agricultural programs." To

help implement the SFOP project, the Department seeks the support of the Association and the individual SWCD Boards within the project area, the assistance of the Virginia Conservation District Employee Association (VACDE) in working with the Department to coordinate having a local SWCD staff person attend as many of these outreach events and farm visits as feasible. Department staff will also attend many of these outreach events. VSU-SFOP will develop a schedule covering several months of the project at a time, which the Department will share with the VACDE and SWCDs where events will be taking place.

Shoreline Erosion Advisory Service (SEAS)

On December 2, 2020, during a Virginia Conservation Assistance Program (VCAP) webinar training, hosted by the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (VASWCD), the Department's SEAS staff were honored to receive the 2020 VCAP Community Partner Award. The Northern Neck SWCD nominated SEAS for this award. As you know very well, VCAP, a program of the VASWCD, is a residential cost-share program that provides financial incentives to property owners. One of the VCAP eligible BMPs in the Chesapeake Bay watershed is Living Shorelines. The Department's SEAS staff support the coastal Districts by providing technical assistance in the proper siting, selection, design, installation, and maintenance of Living Shorelines. This was the inaugural year for this VCAP award, created so that Districts might celebrate a partner who assists property owners and Districts in implementing VCAP projects. SEAS staff also serve on the VCAP Technical Advisory Committee.

Staffing and Recruitment

The Division of Soil and Water Conservation promoted Marissa Roland to the Conservation District Coordinator position in our Tappahannock Office. Anita Tuttle has been hired as our new Urban Nutrient Management Program Coordinator position and Crenel Francis is our Diversity Outreach Internship for this fiscal year. Interviews for our Business Manager position will be conducted soon.

The Christiansburg office will be moving to Radford in late summer, where it will be co-located with the local health department. The Warrenton office will soon combine office space with John Marshall SWCD.