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

**District Audits**
The Department is soliciting bids for another company to perform the bi-annual District audits this fall. The contract with the successful firm will include specific interim milestones in order to better ensure that both the Department, and Districts, that the audits will be conducted and completed in a timely fashion.

**Expansion of Animal Waste Facility VEE Grant Eligibility**
The Virginia Environmental Endowment (VEE) has agreed to expand eligibility, throughout the James River watershed, for its $500,000 grant to the Department for poultry and bovine waste storage facilities. This grant provides matching funds of up to $25,000 per contract, in addition to VACS cost-share, not to exceed 100% of actual eligible costs in combination. Proposed animal waste facilities must be located within Tier I, Tier II and Tier III parcels, as defined by the Chesapeake Conservancy’s Restoration Planner, which can be viewed as a data layer within the Department’s Conservation Application Suite. In addition to the four original SWCDs (Mountain, Mountain Castles, Natural Bridge, and Peter Francisco), other SWCDs that include one or more of these parcels in the target watershed are: Appomattox River, Colonial, Culpeper, Hanover-Caroline, Headwaters, Henricopolis, James River, Monacan, Peaks of Otter, Peanut, Piedmont, Robert E. Lee, Thomas Jefferson and Virginia Dare. These additional Districts only need to sign up potential awardees for VACS, and notify the Department by close of business on September 15, 2021, if they have any FY22 animal waste facility contracts within Tier I, Tier II, or Tier III parcels where potential VEE matching funds will then be requested by the Department. The Department will submit these parcels to VEE by October 1, and VEE will determine which ones they will approve for their matching funds.
Shoreline Erosion Advisory Service (SEAS)
The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), in partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Chesapeake Bay Program, awarded the Department’s SEAS Program a $1,000,000 grant to “accelerate the geographic scale and the rate of living shoreline implementation across Rural Coastal Virginia.” This grant was awarded through NFWF’s Chesapeake Bay Stewardship Fund Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Reduction (INSR) Grant Program. This project will advance the Commonwealth’s goals for shoreline management detailed in the Phase III Chesapeake Bay Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP). The project has four objectives: 1) grow and enhance the existing partnership of entities engaged in living shoreline implementation; 2) develop a cache of shovel-ready living shoreline projects on socially vulnerable sites, agricultural sites, and other priority sites; 3) provide financial incentives to construct new living shorelines on socially vulnerable sites; and 4) continue to verify installation of previously implemented, but undocumented, shoreline management projects that have not yet been credited towards WIP nutrient and sediment reduction goals. The geographic focus for the project is the 12 counties across the Northern Neck, the Middle Peninsula, and the Eastern Shore.

Bay Bill Update
As called for by the Bay Bill, a new portable livestock stream exclusion fencing VACS BMP practice specification, WP-2P, will become available on July 1, 2021. Mapping of perennial streams in Virginia’s Chesapeake Bay watershed, is now underway. Public comment received revised the scope of this project to account for karst areas. Consequently, completion of the mapping will take a little longer than first expected, but will be completed, and incorporated into the Departments Conservation Application Suite in time for Soil and Water Conservation Districts to begin using, no later than July 1, 2022, to determine which streams will need to have livestock exclusion fencing.

Resource Management Plans (RMPs)
Fourteen RMP certification certificates were recently issued to farms in the Appomattox River SWCD. These 14 RMPs include 920 acres in both the Chesapeake Bay watershed and Outside the Chesapeake Bay watershed. This increases the total of certified (i.e. fully implemented) RMPs in Virginia to 161. In order to both sustain and expand the RMP Program, the Department continues to seek additional candidates to become RMP Developers.
Agricultural BMP TAC
Relaxed gathering limits for COVID-19 safety, effective April 1, 2021, and subsequent further loosening of restrictions in May, will enable the Ag BMP TAC to hold in-person subcommittee meetings again. Full TAC meetings later this year, although likely fewer than in the past, are also anticipated.

The Department hosted a webinar for Agricultural BMP TAC members on May 25. This webinar covered: (1) the accomplishments of the TAC over the past three years (CY18-CY20), (2) provided an overview of the results from the recent TAC Survey to help chart changes in procedures for the TAC, and, (3) announced comprehensive plans for the CY21 TAC which will be launched in July beginning with subcommittee meetings.

Because the Ag BMP TAC has already considered over 300 items (CY18–CY20), of which the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board (Board) has adopted over 130 of these as changes into the VACS Program, based on input from TAC members, the number of new items that will be considered by the Ag BMP TAC in CY21 will be limited to no more than 30. These will also be based on the priority rankings received directly from the TAC’s members.

Conservation Planning Certification
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 and a few others. 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. The final requirement for achieving DCR Conservation Planning Certification is submission of a conservation plan for field review by the Department. Submission of the required plans has been slow, since first requested in January. Field reviews by the Department will begin this week and continue, by region, until all plans submitted no later than September 1, 2021, have been field reviewed. Plans submitted after September 1 will not be reviewed and additional course work could be needed.

SWCD staff whose certification was grandfathered were previously given sixty-day extensions by the Board, to complete their required 30 contact hours (continuing education credits), in order to retain their DCR Conservation Planning certification, or take/repeat all of the course work required for certification.

WIP Task #14 – Coordination of State Agencies that Assist Farmers
Several state agencies, and the Association, which is also a signatory of the WIP Task #14 Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), collaborated on a work plan as called for by this MOA (attached). These agencies held their first joint meeting on June 21 to
develop a tentative schedule of cross-training opportunities on each other’s programs. This group will meet twice each year to discuss and document progress achieved, to update plans for the following year, and to award individuals and organizations who make notable contributions to the objectives in the MOA.

**Small Farm Outreach Project**

The Department continues to plan the upcoming outreach project with Virginia State University – Small Farm Outreach Project (VSU-SFOP). The project will official begin in July. A schedule of events over the next few months, will be distributed soon to Districts that cover the 52 county project area.

In addition to the project’s original scope of work, which will be fully funded by the Commonwealth, the EPA Chesapeake Bay Program recently awarded some additional funding, with which VSU-SFOP will print and distribute outreach materials, prepared by DCR, to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers throughout the project area, in both English and Spanish, to inform them of several DCR programs, available without a minimum acreage threshold as required by VACS, such as (direct pay) nutrient management plans, poultry litter transport, conservation planning via Soil and Water Conservation Districts, (direct pay) Resource Management Plans, etc. This additional funding will also assist ongoing discussions by the Board as to how effectively the agricultural best management practice (BMP) financial incentives are being equitably offered to all eligible farmers and ranchers in Virginia. To provide information helpful to the Board, VSU-SFOP will survey its customers, to determine how many have applied for federal and/or state agricultural BMP cost share or technical assistance programs during the last three years, versus how many were successful in being approved and/or received assistance.

**Staffing and Recruitment**

The Department and the Division of Soil and Water Conservation is experiencing a few pending retirements and resignations: Russ Baxter, Leigh Estes, (DCR) James Martin, and Abby Baxter, but has also hired a new Business Manager, who will begin working at DCR on July 10. We wish everyone well as they transition.