

NRCS REPORT
Virginia Soil & Water Conservation Board Meeting
December 6, 2023
Norfolk Waterside Marriott, 235 E. Main Street, Norfolk, VA 23510

STC Highlights

- **NRCS 10-year Commitment to Conservation:** More than 7,900 conservation contracts obligated since 2013 to provide \$324 million in financial assistance for implementing conservation practices on 1.5 million acres. \$177 million in total active funding for natural resource protection on more than a 577,603 acres of Virginia land.
- **Local Work Groups (LWG):** The LWG exercise for FY23 has been successfully completed. The key issues identified for Virginia are loss of Ag Land, conversion of land to solar farms, and the increasing cost of installation of conservation practices. In FY23 34/41 NRCS service centers completed the LWG exercise. We encourage all SWCDs in VA to continue to support this effort.
- **State Technical Committee meeting:** The most recent meeting was hosted in person and virtual. We received great feedback from partners and had a good visit to our VSU farm! We would like to ask the SWCDs to continue to support our technical committee as we target increasing participation.
- **Virginia NRCS Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG):** NRCS is currently looking for potential CIG priorities for FY 2024. In 2023 our priorities were soil health and forestry. We funded a new CIG project to investigate soil health indicators in differently managed parts of commercial vineyards and to develop standards and best practices for soil health testing.
- **FY23 NRCS Funded New Agreements:** To increase our state staffing capacity and technical expertise, NRCS VA supported several new cooperative agreements funded via Farm Bill and IRA authorities.
 - **Virginia Department of Forestry:** \$555,000. To deliver the technical forestry portion of Farm Bill programs. This agreement deals with the cost of technical assistance associated with the Farm Bill programs, including the EQIP, CSP and any other future programs that include forestry components.
 - **Virginia Tech – Integrated Conservation Agronomy:** \$1,130,866. To improve economic and environmental sustainability of agriculture across VA through enhanced soil health, climate smart agriculture, and conservation agronomy outreach, technical assistance, and implementation.
 - **Virginia Tech/Soil Health Coalition:** \$295,805. To work closely with the 2020 Farmers Cooperative (the Co-op) to increase outreach and conservation delivery to their 200+ members in Virginia. Through an innovative partnership between the coalition, the Co-op, and USDA/NRCS, the proposed project will substantially expand NRCS's ability to get conservation on the ground effectively while improving equity in program design and delivery.
 - **American Bird Conservancy:** \$58,072. To work with Appalachian Mountains Joint Venture (AMJV) to build capacity to deliver Farm Bill and IRA conservation programs and provide conservation technical assistance in forestry.

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- **Virginia State University:** \$300,000. To increase the number of participants implementing soil and water conservation practices and provide educational workshops to increase awareness in climate smart practices.
- **Ducks Unlimited:** \$297, 895. To increase technical assistance to producers interested in addressing wildlife and/or water quality resource concerns through the delivery of Climate SMART practices within the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay.
- **American Farmland Trust:** \$300,000. To increase technical assistance to agricultural producers to promote land stewardship and climate-smart agricultural.

State Conservationist November and December Events: Rappahannock River Symposium, Va. Chapter of the Soil & Water Conservation Board, VASWCD Annual Meeting, Chesapeake Bay Climate Smart & Regenerative Ag, Virginia Farm to Table Conference, Farm Bureau Annual Meeting.

ASTC-Programs (ASTC-P)

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

- **Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)**
Received and ranked 1,302 EQIP applications. Obligated \$26.4 million in EQIP funds via 391 contracts. Obligated \$2.68 million in EQIP-IRA funds via 48 contracts.
- **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)–Classic, Renewals & GCI**
Obligated \$7.6 million for 122 CSP renewals on 46,617 acres. Obligated \$11.1 million in CSP Classic funds via 157 contracts. Funded 14 CSP-GCI contracts for \$39,280. Obligated \$5.1 million in CSP-IRA funds via 54 contracts.
- **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**
Currently managing 16 active contracts with total funding of \$2 million covering 6,687.6 acres. Four RCPP proposals awarded as renewals. VA was just recently awarded two new RCPP projects and is a partner state on another project.
- **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)**
Obligated over \$3.2 million in ALE funding via 9 contracts, on 2,179 acres; 11 ACEP-ALE acquisitions underway. 2 ACEP-WRE restorations in progress. 146 existing recorded easements totaling 17,112 acres of land protected and monitored. Two new ALE Program Agreements signed with land trusts (totaling 8 statewide).
- **Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)**
2023 Virginia CIG Notice of Funding Opportunity closed May 29, 2023. The recommended proposals topics were Soil Health and Forestry. A \$200k grant was awarded for one project. Currently managing 12 CIG's totaling \$1.1 million with various partners like: Virginia Tech, Sustainable Chesapeake, Virginia State University, Virginia Department of Forestry, Water Science Institute and Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources.

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Engineering (SCE)

Staffing Updates

- Chris Hamilton is currently the acting SCE.
- Kelly Ramsey started as the State Hydraulic Engineer, effective 9/11/23.
- Two other state office positions (Environmental Engineer & Dam Safety Engineer) are scheduled to be advertised soon.

Dam Rehabilitation

- **Cherrystone Creek 1 and Cherrystone Creek 2A**
Pittsylvania County is leading the locally led design effort for rehabilitating the structures. Pittsylvania County has retained Schnabel Engineering as its consultant. The design process is ongoing. The designs are estimated to take 18 to 24 months. The preliminary design for 2A has been submitted and is currently under review.
- **Beaver Creek 1**
The Rivanna Water and Sewer Authority (RWSA) is leading the locally led design effort for rehabilitating the structure. RWSA has retained Schnabel Engineering as its consultant. The design process is just getting started. The design is estimated to take 18 to 24 months.
- **John's Creek 1**
Mountain Castles SWCD is leading the locally led design effort for rehabilitating the structure. DCR is currently assisting Mountain Castles SWCD in obtaining a consultant. The design is estimated to take 18 to 24 months.

Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP)

NRCS is providing disaster assistance to Buchanan County through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWPP) for a rain event in the Hurley area on August 30 (estimated 6-8 inches). NRCS and Buchanan County completed damage survey reports (DSRs) for 4 county-identified sites. Funding for 3 eligible sites was received in mid-January 2022 and the EWP agreement was finalized on March 15, 2022. The County obtained all the necessary permits and started construction in June 2023. Construction has halted due to a time of year restriction (July 1 – October 31) from performing work in the stream (per their permit). Construction resumed the week of November 6. Buchanan County has requested an extension to June 30, 2024 due to delays in getting construction completed due to the time of year restriction.

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State Resource Conservationist (SRC)

Staffing Updates

- Clarimer Hernandez Vargas, new State Resource Conservationist started her new role on 11/6/2023.

Technical Tools (Field Office Technical Guide)

Continue to maintain the Virginia Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) as a repository of technical resources and references to include conservation practice standards, technical notes, planning criteria, resource concerns, conservation practice physical effects, cost lists and the Virginia Plant Establishment Guide.

Notices released:

- Virginia Technical Guide Notice 450-23-520 regarding Farmed Wetland Hydrology Indicators
- Virginia Technical Guide Notice 450-24-521 regarding Virginia Conservation Practice Standards and supporting documentation.
- Virginia Technical Guide Notice 450-24-522 regarding Grassland Information General References
- Virginia Technical Guide Notice 450-24-523 regarding Guidance Documents for NRCS-CPA-52
- Virginia Technical Guide Notice 450-24-524 regarding Plant Establishment Guide – Planting Recommendations

Bulletins released:

- Virginia Bulletin 180-24-1: Conservation Planning – Primary and Facilitating Practices
- Virginia Bulletin 180-24-2: NRCS-CPA-052 guidance with the usage of CD/Cart, permitting, and the Virginia Ecological Sciences Practice Sheet
- Virginia Bulletin 180-24-3: Conservation Planning Policy and Ecological Sciences Job Approval Authority (ESJAA) Reminders.

State Emergency Board (SEB) Meeting for drought declarations in 11 counties (10/31). There will be another SEB meeting in November as the drought and needs unfold.

Training to Field Staff

• **Webinars**

- Training Webinar: Virginia Conservation Practice Standards (Notice 450-24-521) Information (10/25/23)
- Training Webinar (Program): FY24 Program Rollout Webinar (9/26/23)
- UPCOMING Webinars:
 - November 15th: NWSG CIG Final Presentation, with JB Daniels and Gabe Pent

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- November 29th: TSP Training, with Stacy Bradshaw
- December 13th: Engineering topics followed by Ethics Training, with Chris Hamilton and Markee Connors, respectively.

- **Staff/Partnership Trainings**

- Grazing School for Ag Professionals Training (10/3-4/2023)
- Erosion/RUSLE2 Field Training (10/03,10, 12, 17, 19, 24, 26 & Nov 9, 28/ 2023)
- Farm Visits for Field Staff (10/31/2023)

- **Staff Training/Outreach Events**

- Late Summer Pasture Walk at Tufton Farm (10/6/2023)
- Grazing School for Forum Ag Students (10/18/2023)

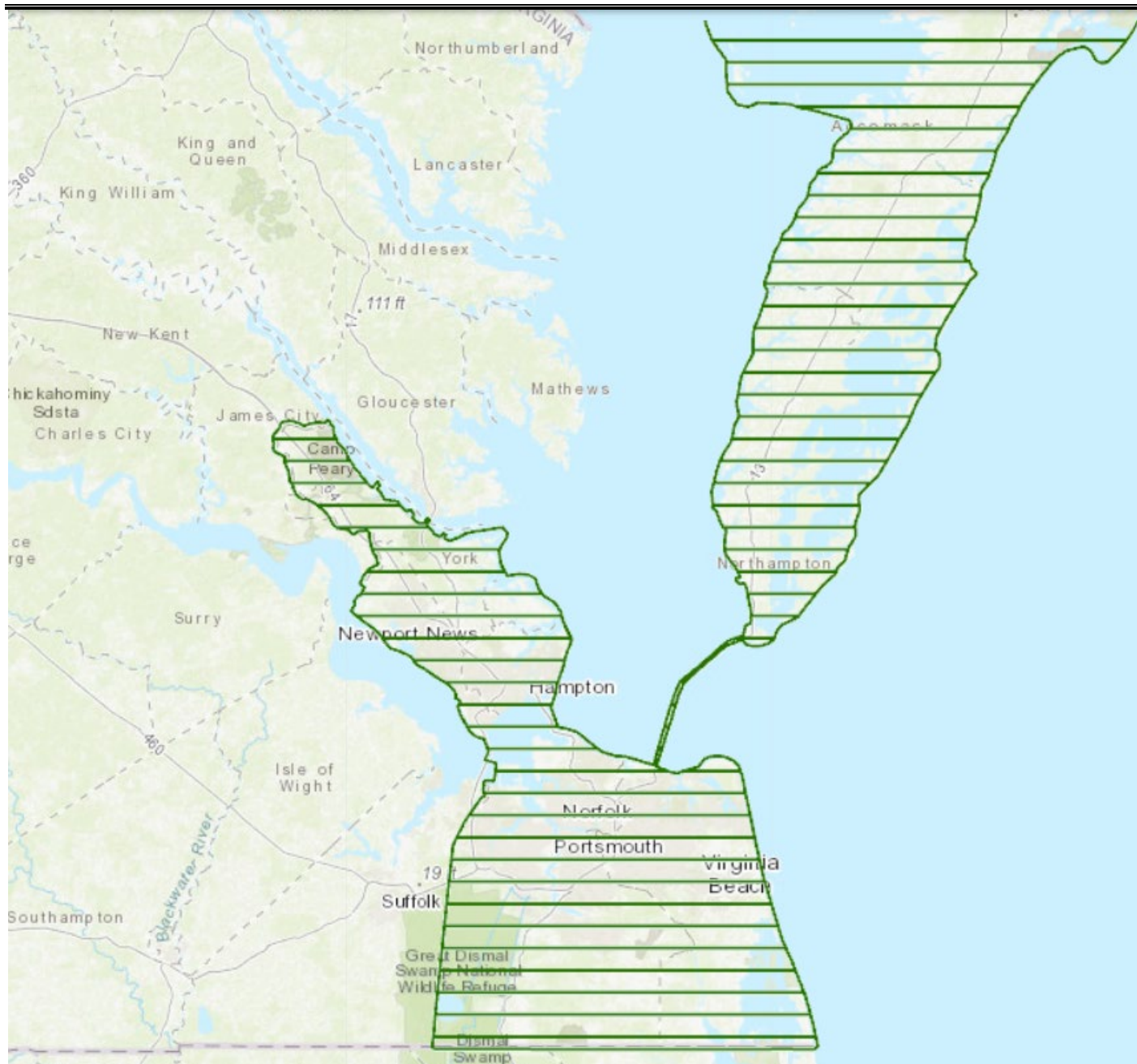
Customer Service and Outreach

- Partnership meeting with FSA to keep communication on CRP cost list and new data.
 - Partnership meeting with VA NRCS Soil Outreach team (SHOUT)
 - Partnered with VFGC and VSU to conduct a 2-day intensive Grazing School for Agricultural Professionals at the Randolph Farm Pavilion in Petersburg.
 - Partnered with local VCE and SWCD staff to present at a pasture walk with 35 attendees to lead the discussion on grazing management, desirable forage species, forage utilization and planning Climate Smart Practices to meet future needs of grazing livestock.
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State Soil Scientist (SSS)

Virginia NRCS is partnering with USGS and FPAC GEO to acquire new LiDAR data for the area shown on the map below. This will be tide coordinated data and will be flown starting in December 2023. Virginia NRCS provided \$40,000 in funding for this project.

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Soil Survey Update

Soils is working with Virginia Tech on a Soil Plant Sciences Division grant for the "Carbon and color: Linking soil carbon properties, ecosystem functions, and color requirements for soil classification and taxonomy" project. The project will study the validity of using soil color to correlate to the amount of carbon for field estimation.

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The Richmond MLRA office is working to update some taxonomically named soil map units to soil series names in Hanover County.

Natural Resources Inventory (NRI) continues for the local data segments for the state. The NRI grazing data collection was completed for FY 23 at the end of September.

Two new soil tunnels were provided to the Harrisonburg and Christiansburg offices. Contact those offices for reserving for events.

Collaboration with HB 895 and 206 regarding solar panel farms and prime farmland continues. A new website to assist localities with planning for potential locations is located here: [VALEN - Virginia Land and Energy Navigator \(vt.edu\)](https://valen.vt.edu/)

Partnerships & Initiatives (P&I)

People Garden Initiative (PGI)

The Virginia team continued to promote the PGI by establishing four additional agreements with the City of Richmond - Richmond Grows Gardens, Groundwork RVA – Hillside Micro Farm, Greater Richmond Fit4Kids and Kinfolk Community RVA. These agreements support 36 garden sites across the city, with a combined total of \$150k in grant funding. Our flagship garden at Fairfield Middle School received an additional \$40k to expand their educational program. Now with more collaborative garden sites in Richmond than ever, NRCS is working to promote Urban Agriculture and resilient local food systems.

New Public Affairs Specialist

Jeff Blakley has joined VA NRCS as the new Public Affairs Specialist in Richmond. Jeff Blakley has over 20 years of experience in the visual arts, media, and communications. He began his career in the U.S. Navy, where he served for nearly a decade as a photographer, videographer, and public affairs specialist. Following his departure from military service in 2008, Jeff transitioned to the civil service, as Chief of Photography for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, where he also completed a Bachelor of Communications and Master of Business Administration. In 2016, Jeff took his skill sets to Capitol Hill, as the Director of House Creative Services for the U.S. House of Representatives, where he served until 2022. Jeff's technical, creative, and business expertise served an integral role in consolidating previously separate offices of photography, graphics, communication, and videography into a unified media department that was better able to meet the needs of representative members of the House. Most recently, Jeff worked as a Social Media Analyst for the Defense Commissary Agency, where he restructured the entirety of the DeCA social media program before joining the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2023 as a Public Affairs Specialist.

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Administration/Management & Strategy (ASTC- M&S)

Virginia NRCS Personnel Changes

Retirements: No retirements known at this time.

Positions Vacated:

- Stacey Bradshaw, Soil Conservationist, State Office
- Matthew Carroll, Soil Conservationist, Louisa Service Center
- Aneka Jones, Administrative Coordinator, Farmville Area Office

Positions Moved:

- Wesley Hedrick (formerly Soil Conservationist in Verona Service Center): **moved to** become the Area Resource Conservationist, Harrisonburg Area Office
- Dana Bayless (formerly District Conservationist in Louisa Service Center): **moved to** become the CSP Coordinator, State Office
- Emily Aleshire (formerly District Conservationist in the Courtland Service Center): **moved to** become the DC in the Emporia Service Center.

Personnel Added:

- Sarah (Katherine) Sullivan, Civil Engineer, Christiansburg Area Office
- Kelly Ramsey, Hydraulic Engineer, State Office
- Jeffrey Blakley, Public Affairs Specialist, State Office
- Clarimer Hernandez Vargas, State Resource Conservationist, State Office

Detailed/Acting:

- Greg Meade, District Conservationist in the North Tazewell Service Center, is acting DC in the Abingdon Service Center.
- Rex Rexrode, District Conservationist in the Culpeper Service Center, is acting DC in the Verona Service Center.
- Andrew Faison, District Conservationist in the Dinwiddie Service Center, is acting DC in the Courtland Service Center.
- Benjamin Young, Soil conservationist in the Accomac Service Center, is now acting District Conservationist in the same office.
- Trenton Howell, District Conservationist in the Chesapeake Service Center, has **completed** his detail as acting DC in the Courtland Service Center.
- Rachel Loveday, Area Resource Conservationist in Farmville Area Office, has **completed** her detail as acting State Resource Conservationist in the State Office.