**STC Highlights**

* **Staffing Updates:** We currently have 173 full time employees on board. Our target goal is 185 by the end of the Fiscal Year.
* **State Budget:** Our FY24 state budget is $100M, this is due to the additional funding coming from the Inflation Reduction Act.
* **Programs:** Virginia NRCS is currently utilizing **ACT NOW** to process conservation applications in some ranking pools to promote faster review and action. ACT NOW allows NRCS to immediately approve and obligate a ranked eligible application in a designated ranking pool when the application meets or exceeds a state-determined minimum ranking threshold score. This eliminates the previous need to wait for all applications to be reviewed and preapproved in a ranking pool.
  + To date for FY24 - obligated 2.2 million across 122 contracts.
* **Conservation Innovation Grants** – We have funded over 44 CIG projects in Virginia since 2010, over $6.6M. NRCS will also have a Notice of Funding Opportunity for CIG. Our proposed 2024 State priorities, under FB and/or IRA funding authorities include: Soil Health ($900,000), Tribal Applicants ($50,000), Urban Applicants ($50,000), and Forestry Applicants ($50,000).
* **Local Work Groups (LWG):** We are currently working on our FY24 LWGs for Virginia. As part of this year’s process, we’re planning a ~~potential~~ training to increase consistencies across the state. Our goal is to be champions and role models on how to complete this process effectively, while providing valuable feedback to our stakeholders.
* **State Technical Committee meeting:** Our next meeting is scheduled for April 24th at the USDA-NRCS State Office.
* **WEWAI Training** - Currently, the National Office is evaluating a potential training opportunity to be hosted here in Virgnia in 2024: Working Effectively with American Indians (WEWAI). Once details are available, we will share with our conservation partners to determine their interest.
* **Grants and Agreements -** Virginia remains a model of technical excellence, innovation, and sound fiscal management. Our strong partnership focus is paving the way for collaborative conservation.
  + In FY23 we funded 7 new agreements working with 8 conservation partners. Putting about $2.9M in the state to assist with education, outreach, technical assistance, staffing capacity, development of new partnerships, and increasing conservation implementation in the state.
  + This year, we are working on three Notice of Funding Opportunities: one for cooperative agreements for outreach and technical assistance ($4 million), and two grants, one for Tribal Conservation Grants ($250,000) and one for Urban Agriculture Conservation Grants ($250,000).
* **Trainings** - NRCS is coordinating with other conservation partners to offer joint training opportunities for our staff and partners in Virginia, an example of this is last’s years Agroforestry training.

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**ASTC-Programs (ASTC-P)**

* **Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)**

Received 1,318 EQIP applications, ranking is underway for eligible applications. EQIP allocation is $21.2 million. EQIP-IRA allocation is $28.6 million. 125 EQIP applications are currently obligated for $2.2 million (15 are IRA contracts).

* **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)–Classic, Renewals & GCI**

Received 370 CSP- Classic applications. CSP classic allocation is $13.8 million. Obligated 58 CSP Renewal contracts with total funding of $2.6 million. CSP-IRA allocation is $9.2 million.

* **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**

Five active FB14 agreements. Eight active FB18 agreements. Agreements totaling $41.2 million. Sixty-four FY24 applications with funding requests for $3.3 million.

* **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)**Received 22 ALE applications with funding requests for $14.9 million on 10,226 acres. 11 ACEP-ALE acquisitions underway. 1 ACEP-WRE restoration in progress. 145 existing recorded easements totaling 16,606 acres of land protected and monitored. One WRE application totaling 851 acres.
* **Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)**

2024 Virginia CIG Notice of Funding Opportunity opened March 11, 2024, and closes May 10, 2024. The recommended proposals topics were Soil Health, Urban Ag, Tribal and Forestry. Four CIGs totaling $895,243, with partners like Virginia Tech, Sustainable Chesapeake, Virginia State University. Two contribution agreements with Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources and the Department of Forestry totaling 183,235; One USDA agreement with Virginia Forage Grassland Council totaling $297,223.10; One Contribution Agreement with Virgina Tech for Agronomist totaling $1.1 million; One-VPA-HIP Agreement with DWR totaling $2.9 million. Closed out CIG agreements for 2018-2021.

**Engineering (SCE)**

**Staffing Updates**

* Kelly Ramsey is currently the acting State Conservation Engineer (SCE), effective 1/15/24.
* The Watershed Dam engineer was advertised, no applicants to interview.
* Currently interviewing applicants for the Environmental Engineer position.

**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.

* **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 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)**

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 2021 (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 will be finalized by June 30, 2024.

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**State Resource Conservationist (SRC)   
  
Staffing Updates**

* Business Tool Specialist position job announcement went out on 3/8/2024.
* We are working on the HEL & Wetland Compliance Specialist position.

**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.

**Bulletins/Notices released:**

* Nothing was released.

**Training to Field Staff**

* **Webinars:**
  + **Urban Agriculture Training (1/10/2024)**
  + VA NRCS Ag Soil Erosion & RUSLE2 Assessment (1/24/2024)
  + FSA Compliance Revision Training (2/7/2024)
  + ArcGIS Pro: Tips & Tricks (2/21/2024)
  + Job Approval Authority Training (3/6/2024)
  + EWP Training & Urban Agriculture & Small-Scale Farming Overview (3/20/2024)
* **Staff/Partnership Trainings**
  + CD/CART Training (1/17/2024)
  + CSP In-person Training per area
  + SWCD-Partnership Erosion Training & Certification Program (3/27/2024)
  + RCCP Training (2/22/2024)
  + State and Local Resources for Establishing Silvopasture Webinar (2/27/2024)
* **Staff Training/Outreach Events**
  + VA No Till Alliance (VANTAGE) Winter Conference
  + Novel Endophyte Fescue: A Technological Solution to a Toxic and Costly Problem (1/17/24)
  + VFGC Winter Forage Conference (1/23,24,25,26/2024)

**Customer Service and Outreach**

* Virginia Crop Production Association Crop Summit (1/16 &18/2024)

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**State Soil Scientist (SSS)**

National Resources Inventory grazing land data collection training for staff teams will be conducted the first week of May.

The new SSURGO portal has been released.  Since Arc Map is being retired, and Arc Pro taking its place.  Arc Pro does not recognize MS Access databases which were used for the soils tabular data.  SSURGO portal uses SQLITE and does the same things as before with soils tabular data a great deal faster.

**Soil Survey Update**

MLRA soil survey office is working on renaming a few soil map units in Hanover County.  They were named as Udults-Ocrepts on differing slopes.  The project plans on studying the soil map units to give them soil series names and refine the data to give better soil interpretations.

The Currituck Sound coastal zone soil survey mapping project is set to begin this year.

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**Partnerships & Initiatives (P&I)**

* Two new **National Equity Agreements** have been awarded for Virginia in 2024.
  + **Africulture**, to assist historically underserved farmers and ranchers in Virginia in accessing NRCS services, including technical assistance, which may lead to enrolling in NRCS farm bill programs such as EQIP and other Conservation programs. As a minority owned and led organization with experience and the target area of Virginia, Africulture will effectively perform agricultural outreach to historically underserved farmers and ranchers, including African American, Veteran, Limited Resource, and Beginning Farmers, as well as students. The goal of this project is to equip socially disadvantaged producers with the tools and skills needed for them to successfully access and utilize NRCS programs and services.
  + **M.A.D. Krew Worldwide, Inc**, to engage historically underserved producers to adopt no tillage, climate-smart conservation practices within the Tidewater Region of Virginia and encourage participation in NRCS conservation programs. The overarching objective of this project is to create a support system for beginning, historically underserved, and socially disadvantaged farmers to facilitate and support them as they begin working with NRCS. To do this the recipient will:
    - Create a network of beginning farmers for the purpose of supporting and encouraging conservation practices amongst producers within the Tidewater Region of Virginia.
    - Assist producers to mitigate the impact of extreme climate conditions through instruction and hands-on demonstration of climate-smart conservation practices.
    - Increase NRCS’s ability to incorporate an increased quantity of socially disadvantaged farmers by creating an awareness of NRCS planning process and program implementation to underserved communities and historically underserved producers.
    - Increase the number of socially disadvantaged farmers who understand the planning and process of working with the FSA and NRCS.
* The USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is accepting applications for a **$6.1 million competitive grant program designed to improve access to fresh and healthy foods in urban areas** where such access is either limited or unavailable. The program will be administered by NRCS’ **Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production.** Applications must be made online at grants.gov and must be filed before midnight on April 9, 2024, to be considered for funding in the current fiscal year.
* **State Tribes Summit** - NRCS Virginia is leading an effort to host a 2024 State Tribal Summit for the non-federal recognized state tribes. This summit will be like what we held for Federally Recognized Tribes back in 2022.
* This year, we are working on three **Notice of Funding Opportunities**: two grants, one for Tribal Conservation Grants ($250,000) and one for Urban Agriculture Conservation Grants ($250,000) and one for cooperative agreements for outreach and technical assistance ($4 million).