

Views From The Foothills

A Publication of the Culpeper Soil & Water Conservation District
Serving Culpeper, Greene, Madison, Orange & Rappahannock Counties
www.culpeperswcd.org

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M. Johnson

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Five County Conservation District Seeks Citizen Input for Long Range Plan

The Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District Board of Directors will soon be undertaking an update to the District's Long-Range Strategic Plan for delivering conservation services and programs across Culpeper, Madison, Orange, Greene and Rappahannock Counties. To help inform the Board's decisions, the District will be conducting an on line survey which can be readily accessed from the District's website. www.culpeperswcd.org or at www.surveymonkey.com/cswcd. The short survey is preceded by a concise 2-page overview of current District operations, programs, services and potential challenges. Also available at the District's website (www.culpeperswcd.org) is the most recent (2021) Annual Report for those wishing to do a deeper review of the District's programs and services.

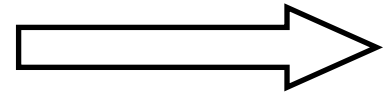
The Mission of the District is "To promote the stewardship of soil and water and the conservation of our natural resources by educating and providing technical assistance to manage, protect and enhance the land and water for the benefit and enjoyment of the citizens of Culpeper, Madison, Orange, Greene and Rappahannock Counties." The District Board encourages any and all citizens to provide input towards the future plan and additionally encourages feedback from those who have previously received direct services and benefits from District programming. By and large District is a customer service based political subdivision of the Commonwealth and your input towards how they serve you is critical for its success.



Photo credit: [Planning, a Primary Function of Management: Characteristics and process \(thefactfactor.com\)](https://thefactfactor.com)

Interview with Jeremy Engh of Lakota Ranch

By David Massie, Conservation Specialist III



NOTE: See page 11 for information on upcoming Education Field Day.

Lakota Ranch, located in Remington, Virginia on the banks of the Rappahannock River, is home to the oldest and most prominent Devon beef cattle herd in the country. With a rich family history in agriculture and livestock production, the Engh's have long been recognized for the grass-fed beef produced by their Devon cattle and for the quality of the cattle themselves. This multi-generational farm specializes in grass-fed cattle and have participated in many conservation programs over the years to help achieve their goals.

How did the farm evolve into being a grass-fed operation? Grass-fed was a passion of mine from my early days in agriculture. Having been lucky enough to study under and learn from those who came before me, I have always had a passion for grass fed. It really started with environmental concerns much more than an interest in producing a healthier beef product. Perhaps the biggest surprise and benefit from farming this way is all the side benefits; healthier food, healthier animals, healthier air, water, soil, etc.

How did you choose Devon cattle? My grandfather chose a Devon cattle before I had ever even been born. And it was just lucky that the breed was so well suited for and has such a prestigious history of performance and efficiency on grass.

Why did you choose to participate in conservation programs? Again, conservation and environmental awareness have always been passions of mine. So participating in programs / practices that teach me more about conservation, support sustainable ag, and promote environmental awareness are programs that make sense to me and are things I would have wanted to implement regardless.

How did participating in these programs help your operation? Participation assisted me in several ways: education, financial support, and being able to network with like-minded individuals.

What advice would you give to producers who want to improve their grazing operations? The first piece of advice I would give is to visit producers that are doing things the way you want to in an environment similar to your own. Seeing conservation practices working in production systems that are both economically and environmentally sustainable is the best teacher you could ask for.

Looking back, would you change anything about your operation, or your participation in conservation programs? Did you have a good experience with these programs, and did you face any challenges? There are lots of things I would change. Our success has come from being observant and adaptive. For all of our success we have had many failures. Not every seed grows, and not every idea works. Observation, perseverance, and adaptability are the keys. Projects that do not work are not failures if you learn from them.

Overall my experience has been good. We did have some problems years and years ago with spring development projects that were overseen by my predecessor but that was reconciled long ago.

Overall, my main challenge has been finding and understanding programs that I qualify for and how the implementation of those programs coincides with or contrasts with programs available by other organizations.



Forage and Grazing Management Educational Field Day



The Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District is hosting an upcoming field day to showcase grazing management, fencing and water system design and infrastructure, and explore conservation program opportunities. Location and time will be:

**Thursday, June 16, 2022
4:00-7:00 PM
Lakota Ranch
9272 Big Horn Road
Remington, Virginia 22734**

This event is free and includes a meal. Preregistration is required for planning purposes. Please call (540) 825-8591 to register. Contact David Massie at (540) 825-8591 or davidm@culpeperswcd.org for more information.





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www.ext.vt.edu

Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments. Its programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, military status, or any other basis protected by law.

If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services or other accommodations to participate in this activity, please contact Sarah Sharpe, VCE-Greene at (434-985-5236/TDD) during business hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event.
TDD number is (800) 828-1120.



HOW TO START A FARM

DETAILS:

When: May 10, 17, 24 (Tuesday)
from 5:30 pm - 8 pm

Where: Greene County
Extension Office (10013
Spotswood Trail, Stanardsville)

How Much: \$40 per person
(light dinner provided each
night)

WHY ATTEND?

- Introduction to Whole Farm Planning
- How to decide what to grow
- Deciding where and how to sell what you grow
- Local Resources Available to New Farmers
- Networking opportunities with other new local farmers

Zoom/Hybrid
Possibilities Available

Register Here:
[www.tinyurl.com/
howtostartafarm2022](http://www.tinyurl.com/howtostartafarm2022)

Questions? Reach out
to Sarah Sharpe at
seweaver@vt.edu or
434-985-5236

Resource Management Planning Program

The Virginia Resource Management Planning program provides an additional voluntary tool to promote the use of conservation practices that improve both farming operations and water quality. Resource Management Plans (RMPs) can help farm owners and operators take advantage of all the conservation measures at their disposal. The plans are designed to encourage the use of a high level of best management practices (BMPs) that reduce runoff pollution to local waters and, in many cases, improve the farmer's financial bottom line.

In return for full implementation of an RMP, the plan holder can be assured that he or she is in compliance with any proposed new state nutrient, sediment and water quality standards if any new standards/regulations are adopted. This in particular relates to regulations related to the Chesapeake Bay and all local stream segment TMDLs. The certification is valid for nine years provided the farmer continues to implement the RMP. Participation in the program is completely voluntary and RMPs can be revised during the nine years to adjust to farming or market conditions.

The RMP concept was developed at the urging of the Virginia agricultural community. The approach provides a comprehensive assessment of the conservation needs of a farming operation. Not only will RMPs serve as a tool to encourage BMP implementation, but it will also be used to document practices in use, providing verified data to validate the agricultural sector's level of conservation implementation. Better tracking of agricultural BMPs through the use of resource management plans will also provide decision makers more accurate data when determining future funding needs for cost-share and other incentive programs.

A farm owner or operator can choose to have an RMP on the whole farm, a tract or just one field. RMPs can be developed for cropland, hay or pasture land uses. All RMPs must contain a nutrient management plan and a soil conservation plan to reduce soil loss to "T." Crop and hay land require a 35-foot forested or vegetative buffer adjacent to perennial streams. Pasture fields must have livestock excluded from perennial streams, although limited acres areas and stream crossings are allowed. Also, the plan must be written by a certified plan developer.

How it Works: Four Steps

Assessment: A certified RMP developer visits the operation, meets with the farmer, evaluates the land and practices in place and begins development of options to meet the requirements.

Plan Development: The certified RMP developer meets with the farmer and discusses options to meet the requirements. Once the farmer agrees to the particular BMPs and a schedule for implementation, the RMP may be submitted to the Culpeper District for review and approval.

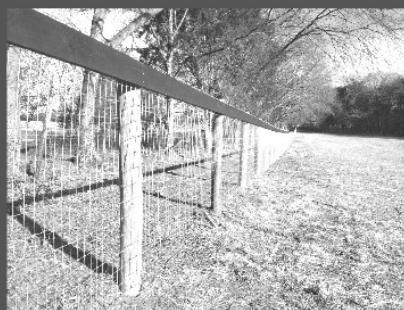
Plan Implementation: Once the approved plan has been fully implemented, the farmer requests that the planner visit the farm to certify implementation. Then the District reviews that certification. A certificate of RMP implementation is issued once the District certifies full implementation.

Verification: Continued verification visits are conducted every few years to ensure the continued proper functioning and maintenance of the BMPs.

Funding is being made available to pay for the development of resource management plans. Cost share funding is available for most of the BMPs needed to meet RMP requirements.

For more information on RMP options contact the District at 540-825-8591.





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2021 Conservation Awards

Each year, the Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District holds an annual banquet to honor residents who have demonstrated leadership in the stewardship of local soil and water resources. This year, in lieu of a banquet, District staff held individual presentations at schools and homes.

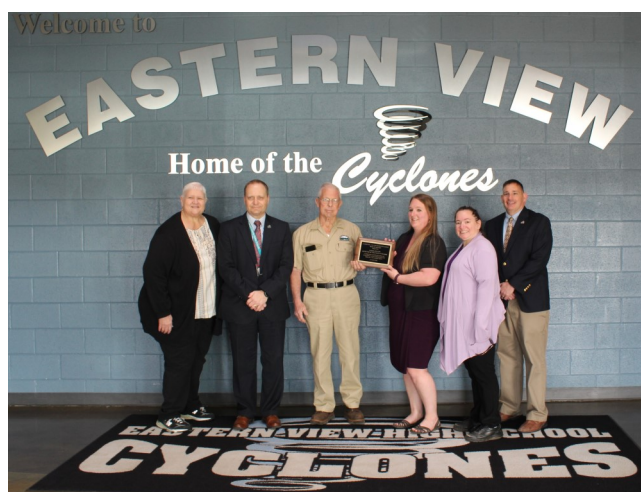
The District recognized individuals and landowners with District level awards recognizing commitments to wildlife habitat, forestland management and natural resource education.

The 2021 Forestry Award was given to Jeffrey Green of Madison County.

The 2021 Wildlife Habitat Award was given to Carolyn Smith of Madison County.

The 2021 Educator of the Year Award was given to two individuals: Kimberlee Whitehead of Culpeper County High School and Rachel Stuart of Eastern View High School.

The Clean Water Farm Awards will be presented throughout May and June in each County.



Culpeper District Directors, Staff Recognized

In November 2021 the Virginia Chapter of the American Soil and Water Conservation Society met to recognize outstanding individuals and organizations. The group recognized Culpeper SWCD Education Committee with the 2021 June Sekoll Media Award. According to the Society, “June Sekoll Media Award is a Virginia Chapter award for an individual or group that writes or produces materials for radio, television, newspapers, magazines, or organizational publications, which significantly increase public understanding and promote wise use of Virginia’s natural resources.”

In December 2021, the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts recognized Culpeper SWCD Education and Information Coordinator Stephanie DeNicola with the Chaffin Award for Outstanding Employees with over 10 years of experience. According to VASWCD, “The VASWCD Educational Foundation presents these employee awards to recognize the contributions of employees in all Virginia Districts and to highlight the accomplishments of some of the best employees.”

In January 2022, Greene County Elected Director Robert Runkle was recognized by District Board Chair Lynn Graves with The 2021 Chairman’s Award in recognition of over 20 years as a Director and Chair of the Personnel Committee.



An Introduction to The Virginia Soil Health Coalition

For years, many farmers and organizations across Virginia have been promoting practices that improve soil health. Our understanding of the value and the benefits of healthy soils have deepened over time. We understand that regenerative agricultural systems focused on soil health strengthen the vitality and resilience of individual farms, our entire agricultural economy, and our natural environment.

The Virginia Soil Health Coalition envisions a thriving and diverse agricultural landscape in Virginia that is profitable, sustainable and resilient now and for future generations. To realize this vision, the Coalition facilitates communication and collaboration among partners across the Commonwealth to support farmers, leverage resources, and advance strategies that increase soil health and the understanding of its many co-benefits.

The Virginia Soil Health Coalition is committed to:

- Advancing a holistic approach to soil health through practices that sustain and regenerate the landscape
- Valuing and prioritizing the needs of Virginia's farmers
- Strengthening the resilience, productivity, and profitability of Virginia's farm economy
- Focusing on areas of alignment with a collaborative mindset
- Acknowledging different perspectives and contexts

The definition of soil health as put forth by NRCS is the continued capacity of a soil to function as a vital, living ecosystem that sustains plants, animals and humans. Soil health refers to the dynamic biological, chemical, and physical properties of soil that allow it to do this core job. A primary way these properties are supported is by building and enhancing soil organic matter or soil carbon. Soil health also refers to the holistic management of land that not only seeks to stop soil degradation but also seeks to build soil back up thereby providing diverse co-benefits. Those on-farm and ecosystem benefits include, but are not limited to:

- Increasing plants' access to soil nutrients
- Reducing fertilizer inputs
- Boosting and stabilizing crop yield
- Increasing a field's water holding capacity
- Suppressing plant disease
- Increasing a farm's resilience to drought and flood
- Reducing soil loss from fields and pasture
- Enhancing water quality
- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions
- Increasing carbon sequestration or drawdown

We follow and support the four core principles of soil health management:

1. Keep the Soil Covered
2. Minimize Soil Disturbance
3. Maximize Living Roots
4. Energize with Diversity

Are you interested in learning more about or getting involved with the Virginia Soil Health Coalition? Reach out to the Coalition Coordinator, Mary Sketch at mksketch2@vt.edu.



Prescribed Fire as a Land Management Option

By Courtney Pooton-Kidwell, USDA-NRCS Soil Conservationist

Fire has been used for generations across the country to manage different landscapes. As interest continues to grow in managing grasslands and forests, there is also an increase in awareness growing about fire as a management tool on these lands. USDA-NRCS works alongside partner agencies and with our own partner staff Private Land Wildlife Biologists (PLWB) to help inform and plan prescribed fire as a management practice for landowners. Technical assistance is continually available, and financial assistance is frequently available, to landowners and operators who have an interest in restoring a more native habitat on their property.

Prescribed fire is often planned on open, old pasture where a native seed bank exists, and the land operator wants to transition the field to native grasses or meadow with minimal use of herbicide. When clients invite us to their properties, we often see fields that have had minimal nutrient inputs in past years and diverse vegetation that will allow for a successful transition through this management scheme. However, every property is different and has different influences on practices, so site specific planning is always NRCS's main goal.

Many operators use prescribed fire as a management technique following a native meadow, or wildlife habitat, establishment. Depending on the goals of the client, and the ideas of the PLWB for that site, we may see fire used every two to five years to manage woody trees and shrubs and to remove dead plant material build up on the ground, also known as the thatch layer. This improves habitat for ground nesting birds who rely on bunch type, native grasses such as Little Blue Stem and Indiangrass.

A less common use of prescribed fire that NRCS sees in this district, is within forests. The use of prescribed fire within forests can significantly reduce the likelihood of wildfire by controlling the litter layer on the forest floor. When forests have dense understories many tree seedlings may be unable to make their way to the middle and upper levels of the forest canopy. Prescribed fire assists fire-tolerant woody species in doing this once the understory vegetation is being controlled.

In a typical year Virginia Department of Forestry alone assists with over 4,000 acres of prescribed and controlled burns on lands across the state. This combined with the additional thousands of acres managed through fire by private consultants and contractors is leading to an increase in awareness, education, and, most importantly, native habitat for Virginia's wildlife species who are frequently facing reductions in habitat.


Understanding fire behavior, Virginia's burning laws, and "fire seasons" are essential before attempting to implement prescribed fire on your property. You should not attempt to implement a prescribed fire without assistance from professionals with experience in this management practice. USDA-NRCS, Virginia Department of Forestry, and the Virginia Prescribed Fire Council are just a few of the many resources available to landowners and operators who may be interested in the use of prescribed fire on their properties.

- <https://www.vafirecouncil.com/>
- <https://dof.virginia.gov/wildland-prescribed-fire/prescribed-burning/>



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Drinking Water Testing Clinic for Residential Wells for Culpeper and Rappahannock Residents

The Virginia Household Water Quality Program (VAHWQP) is a Virginia Cooperative Extension program that is designed to improve the water quality and health of Virginians using private water supplies. Initiated in 1989, VAHWQP drinking water clinics have been conducted in nearly every county across Virginia, and 35,000 samples have been analyzed and results confidentially returned to participants. The best part: your water test results are explained in a helpful meeting, where ways of preventing contamination and treating water quality problems are also addressed. Drinking water clinics are organized by your local Extension Agent and Virginia Tech faculty in the Biological Systems Engineering Department. ***Participation is voluntary and all information is kept strictly confidential.*** Anyone with a private water supply system (including wells, springs, and cisterns) may participate.

The Virginia Well Owner Network (VWON) is a linked, capacity-building program. A group of Virginia Cooperative Extension agents and volunteers are trained in proper well construction and location, maintenance and protection of wells and springs, interpretation of water analysis, and water treatment options. The network is an excellent resource for homeowners.

Samples are analyzed for the following: iron, manganese, nitrate, lead, arsenic, fluoride, sulfate, pH, total dissolved solids, hardness, sodium, copper, total coliform bacteria and E. Coli bacteria. Confidential reports are easy to read and accompanied by a sheet explaining what the numbers mean.

The date is October 26. Residents and landowners in Culpeper and Rappahannock are eligible for a clinic to test your well water.

- Culpeper residents: Ashley Appling at 540-727-3435 ext. 355 or ashappling@vt.edu
 - Rappahannock residents: Kenner Love at 540-675-3619 or klove@vt.edu.
- Culpeper SWCD is sponsoring this clinic to reduce the cost of the tests to \$55.



Free Lawn Soil Tests Still Available!

Contact Stephanie DeNicola at stephanied@culpeperswcd.org for information. Photo credit: [Soil Testing Service \(uri.edu\)](http://SoilTestingService.uri.edu)



It Pays to Install a Continuous No-Till System

Your farm can benefit.

Your local Soil and Water Conservation District can help you qualify for funds that decrease the cost of implementing a continuous no-till system of crop production.

No-till also can benefit your bottom line by:

- Reducing fuel and maintenance costs.
- Improving long-term soil quality and crop yield.
- Giving you more time to pursue other activities.

Money comes from the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program, which is carried out by conservation districts and administered by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation.

How and where they work.

Continuous no-till systems reduce non-point source pollution by preventing soil erosion, reducing fertilizer use and limiting nutrient runoff. Crop residues shield the earth from wind and rain, while fixing nitrogen in the soil so it is available to subsequent crops.

Because they increase biomass, no-till systems yield the greatest economic benefits when they are applied to soils that are low in organic content. It's easier than ever to adopt no-till, because methods now have been developed for a variety of cropping systems.



Here's the payoff.

In State Program Year 2022, the Virginia Cost-Share reimbursement rate is:

- \$70/acre for Continuous High Residue Minimal Soil Disturbance Tillage Systems, which are defined as a combination of minimal-till planting methods and nutrient management technologies and maintained for a minimum of five years.
- \$35/acre for Continuous No-Till Forage Production Systems, which are defined as a combination of no-till planting methods and nutrient management technologies applied to established forage production fields and maintained for a minimum of 5 years.

District staff can direct you to additional opportunities that fit your operation, including cover crop programs that can enhance the effectiveness of your no-till system.

Take the next step.

Conservation begins with your local Soil and Water Conservation District, which can help you apply for many different cost-share funding programs to help you implement no-till best management practices. They also can identify other conservation programs for which you might qualify.

Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District
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www.culpeperswcd.org





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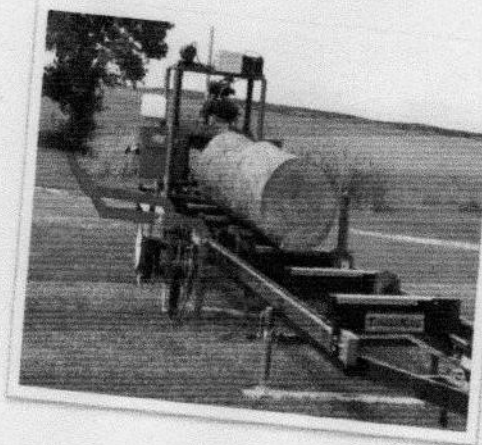
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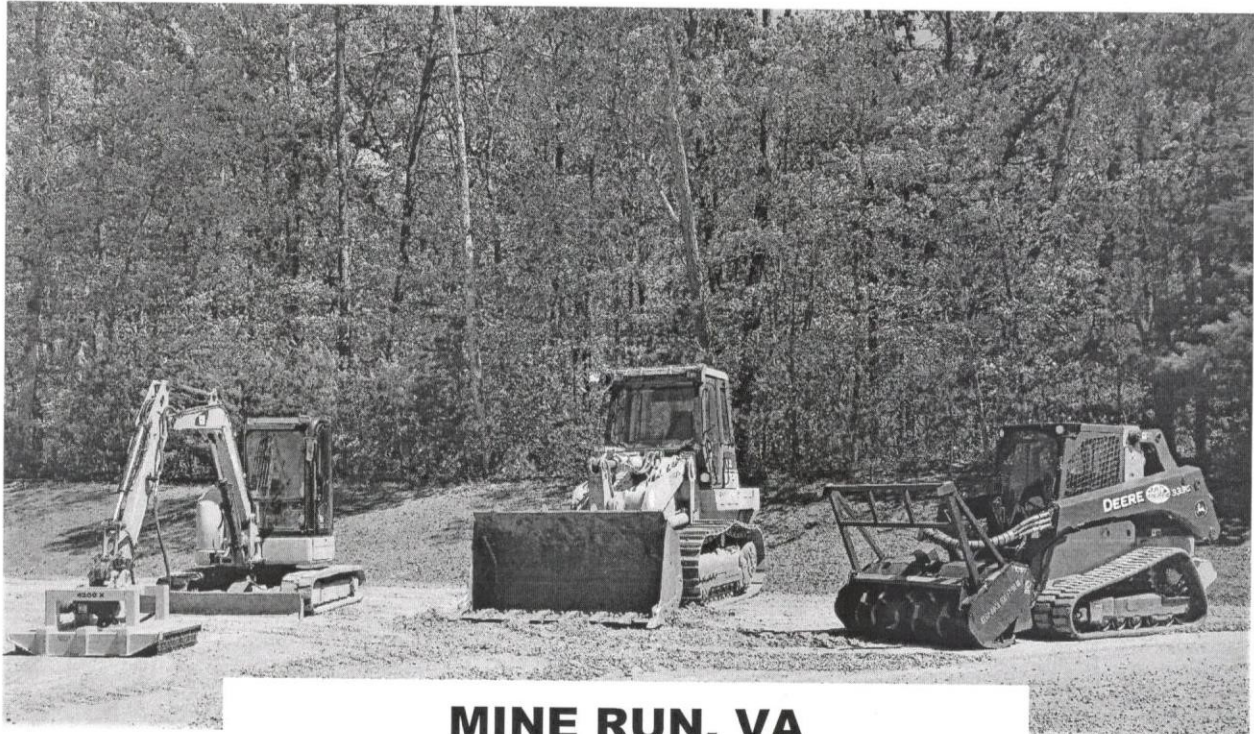


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