

THE VIRGINIA SOIL HEALTH COALITION

Healthy soil supporting productive farms, thriving ecosystems, and resilient communities

2022 Accomplishments

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Background

The soil is a vital, living ecosystem whose health lies at the nexus of environmental, economic, and social resilience. Healthy soils are integral to agricultural sustainability and provide many co-benefits from water infiltration to carbon sequestration to improved crop yields and much more. Over history, civilizations have degraded the land and soil through generations of intensive production with nearly one third of the world's topsoil lost from erosion over the past 40 years. To regenerate, restore and protect our soils, we must expand adoption of soil health management strategies that increase soil organic matter, reduce erosion, and enhance soil biology.

Virginia has over 27 million acres of land and of this nearly 30 percent is farmland. In 2017, Virginia reported the market value of agricultural products at the farm gate at \$3.96 billion, which resulted in a subsequent \$91 billion of economic impact in agriculture and forestry. The majority of this market value and economic impacts are dependent on soil and its interactions with air, water, energy, and people.

The Virginia Soil Health Coalition (VSHC) works to strengthen and support a broad, collaborative network that improves and expands soil health across all of Virginia's landscapes. Over the past two years, the Coalition has expanded to include 36 partner organizations who support our vision, mission, and common ground and work to collectively improve soil health and water quality in the commonwealth. As a convener and coordinator, the VSHC has a unique, birds-eye view of what is happening on the ground, where there are gaps, and where there are opportunities for innovation and collaboration. By coordinating partners to address these gaps and opportunities, the Coalition plays a key role in accelerating implementation of soil health practices and systems. Led by a Steering Committee, the VSHC serves as a convener, communicator, and coordinator, hosting quarterly meetings of all partners, with attendance averaging over 75 participants.

With significant expansion over the past two-years, the Coalition saw the need to clarify our work and identify core priorities and strategies for sustainable growth and impact to help reach goals of Virginia's Phase III WIP. Throughout 2022, the Steering Committee and other key stakeholders have been involved in a collaborative, iterative strategic planning process that has resulted in an updated comprehensive and inclusive vision and mission and adaptive plan. The Coalition is primed and ready to implement the bold, collaborative plan to increase implementation of water quality improvement practices on the ground.

Accomplishments

- ❖ Expansion of Coalition network: [36 partners](#) including federal and state agencies, local soil and water districts, nonprofits, producer organizations, and private businesses who have shared their logo with the Coalition.
- ❖ Quarterly Open Meetings: March 14th (85 attendees), June 16th (67 attendees), September 15th (61 attendees)
- ❖ Monthly Steering Committee meetings
- ❖ 8-month iterative strategic planning process guided by Due East Partners resulting in [Collaborative Strategic Plan](#) and Collective Action Plan to guide the Coalition's priorities and efforts in the coming three years.
- ❖ Expansion of 4 The Soil Awareness Initiative
 - Bi-weekly episodes of the "4 The Soil: A Conversation" podcast. 26 episodes in 2022, produced in partnership with On The Farm Media, featuring farmers, soil health experts, researchers, thought leaders, entrepreneurs, and more. The podcast receives approximately 375 downloads/month and has had over 5,000 downloads since starting in 2021.
 - Bi-weekly newsletters (starting June 2022) to a listserv of ~400 people
 - Expansion of the social media presence and following: Facebook (780 followers), Instagram (733 followers), Twitter (147 followers).
 - Regular blog posts sharing soil health resources, stories, and perspectives.
 - Virtual conversations with nationally known speakers including David Montgomery and Anne Biklé, Karen Washington, Jon Stika, Steve Groff, Nicolette Hahn Niman, among others.
 - Launch of new and improved [4 The Soil website](#).
 - Weekly 4 The Soil workgroup meetings.
- ❖ Identify funding opportunities and lead proposal writing. Written/supported proposals include:
 - 2022 Chesapeake Bay License Plate Fund (\$10,000)
 - 2023 National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) Chesapeake Bay Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Reduction Program (\$1M with \$1M in match)
 - USDA Climate Smart Commodities Program in partnership with NFWF and partners across Chesapeake Bay Watershed (\$10M)
 - NFWF Small Watershed Grant led by Sustainable Chesapeake
- ❖ Begin implementation of 2-year soil health train-the-trainer program through SARE PDP grant
 - Eight Dig & Demo Field Days in October and November training over 200 agricultural service providers from diverse agencies and organizations (NRCS, VCE, VT, VSU, SWCDs, etc.). Follow-up survey of all attendees to inform next steps and evaluate impact.
- ❖ Outreach/exhibition at conferences, meetings, and farmer expos across the state (e.g. Virginia Ag Expo, VSU Roots to Boots, VSU College of Ag Field Day, VABF Conference, VASWCD Annual Meeting, VA United Land Trusts Conference, various on-farm field days, etc.)
- ❖ Ongoing communications with partners across the state including:
 - Monthly newsletter sent to listserv of ~300 people
 - Website with up-to-date calendar, resource list, and meeting information
- ❖ Partner with Integrated Conservation Agronomy Team (VT/NRCS) on various soil health field days including:
 - Three on-farm variable rate nitrogen field days
 - Halifax Twilight Soil Health Field Day
 - VA Ag Expo soil health exhibit
 - Central VA Ag Expo
- ❖ 15 presentations to partners and stakeholders by Coalition Director about the VSHC, soil health, and collaboration

Goals for 2023

With a firm foundation under our feet from the past two years of Coalition development, we plan to look towards opportunities to expand our reach through new, innovative partnerships. We will explore potential partnerships and opportunities to engage more deeply with the food supply chain and food business sector to increase opportunities for producers implementing soil health and water quality practices to connect with consumers and in the marketplace. We

will further refine the engagement structure of the Coalition in a way that allows us to build and leverage relationships to fill capacity gaps and broaden skills and expertise.

Through these expanded partnerships, we will work to reach a more diverse set of producers and landowners, particularly historically underserved farmers. To this end, we will develop an equitable framework to increase accessibility of participation in the Coalition.

The momentum of the VSHC will continue next year through continuation of existing projects and pursuit of new efforts to:

- Identify sustainable funding sources to expand backbone staff team
- Promote unified messaging through shared information channels
- Provide navigation to inform and connect members and partners to resources
- Communicate current research to support organizations implementing on the ground
- Develop work groups to convene partners and members
- Identify and fund projects that advance implementation of innovative soil health approaches
- Identify current and expanded audiences to deepen connection to soil health
- Build out consistent and cohesive narrative to resonate with broader constituency
- Create and execute communications strategy to reach diverse audiences
- Provide resources and educational materials to partners working on advocacy
- Explore formalizing advocacy partnerships