

Virginia Soil Health Coalition Quarterly Meeting
Oct. 28th, 2021
Meeting Minutes

Welcome (Dr. Edwin Martinez, VA State Conservationist, USDA NRCS)

- I. Where NRCS has been and where they are headed
 - a. At the state level VA NRCS has been a key soil health partner and funder.
 - b. At the local level has been a key soil health leader and funder.
 - c. At the leadership level within our org plan to keep VA NRCS on current path.
 - d. As a soil health partner, funder, and leader, there are many opportunities ahead.
 - e. At the national level:
 - i. Since 2012 NRCS has helped producers install soil health practices on more than 40 million acres of ag land
 - ii. 2013 - soil health initiative began with a strong partnership emphasis
 - iii. 2020 - updated the initiative by creating strategic plan
 - iv. NRCS role as funder and partner has been via different avenues, technical assistance, agreement, **CIG grant**, special initiatives, etc.
- II. CIG grants
 - a. Competitive program that match grants that we offer to partners for trying innovative demonstration, research and outreach
 - b. Have funded 41 projects with 27 of these specifically aimed at SH
 - c. Leveraged double that in partner moneys or in-kind match
- III. Local Soil Health impact:
 - a. Field staff lead the charge daily working with our producers and partners
 - b. 133 field staff in 41 offices, supported by 30 area and state office staff
 - c. Diverse expertise: soil conservationists, soil scientists, agronomists, engineers, biologists, technicians, etc.
- IV. FY21 Program report:
 - a. Currently managing 2,361 active contracts = \$137 million on 513,965 acres
 - b. Obligated \$23.8 million in EQIP funding
 - c. Obligated \$1.1 in ACEP-ALE
 - d. \$11.2 million in EQIP, CSP, RCPP payments
- V. Where VA NRCS is headed
 - a. Communication is key!
 - b. Continued support and participation in Coalition activities
 - c. Maintaining openness to partner feedback and collaboration
 - d. Exploring new opportunities

Carbon sequestration and soil health: what is happening across the Commonwealth (James Martin, VA DEQ)

- I. Carbon Sequestration Task force first meeting was Oct 12 and will meet again Nov 3rd
- II. BMP effect on carbon sequestration
 - a. 2.9 million acres of planned BMPS = 2,011,195 tons of CO₂e sequestered

- b. CO2e comes from: 54% tree/forest practices; 26% tillage/grazing; 10% herbaceous practices; 10% cover crop
 - i. BMPs implemented: 76% tillage and grazing; 15% cover crops; 5% tree/forest; 4% herbaceous
- c. Open discussion:
 - i. Are we getting the market penetration we need? Enough farmers/acres? Clearly not. What do we think a program needs to do to incentivize farmers to participate these practices and others on their landscapes?
 - ii. Tad Williams: Re: the challenge of farm rental/ land lease - is there a way for a greater incentive for the landowner rather than the farm owner? Maybe a higher incentive so the landowner will adopt it, which is often a barrier to some farmers for implementing these practices.
 - 1. James Martin: When develop rental rates for soil type, develop them on soil health practices as well
 - 2. Kristen Hughes Evans - the land tax rate codes could be based on working lands that are managed with water quality and carbon sequestration in mind vs working land that produces fewer public benefits. (Taxation was brought up in the first meeting as potential lever).
 - 3. Brent Wills - In my experience, when a landowner understands what options they have in improving soil health on the land they rent, they can build that into the contract that they have with their renter. Most renters are not going to float the cost of these practices/principles unless they are guaranteed either a short-term return on investment (higher price for product) or a long-term guaranteed lease.
 - iii. Derrick Clarke: Want to join the conversation, but is suburban (Loudoun County). Where do urban and suburban folks fit in?
 - 1. Kristen Saacke Blunk: Landowners who are not farming - and are stepping into this soil health space are truly on the frontier of why soil health matters.
 - 2. Mary: Engaging with urban landowners and partners is a HUGE piece of advancing soil health and carbon sequestration
 - 3. E.g. lawn management suggestions (cutting grass at 3.5-4" instead of 3")
 - iv. Chris Lawrence - if we broaden accounting to include voluntary (non-contractual) practices, can we better capture what people are doing on their own?
 - 1. James Martin: Estimates he showed were based on full implementation of WIP, have a good way to go still. Need to make sure that the producers understand the programs that are being offered and we need to understand what they are doing voluntarily. VA took on a survey of producers, to capture all of the

- implementation measures they are already doing to better represent. These results are still pending. Poor response rate.
2. David Bryan: has a voluntary section in the VACS program, although they are outdated. Need to also get the message out to the farmer.
 3. Kendall Tyree: No ability to seek these practices out unless they come into the office. The survey did not align with the signups where they may get a higher response rate. Learned a lot that could be applied if do survey
 4. Tricia Mays: We have some that plant cover crops but can't always make the dates, so the cover is there, but not in compliance to work with the VACS program. Would there be a way to document some of these cases?
 5. James Martin: In recent years, there has been some flexibility on some BMPs such as livestock exclusion. With cover crops the bay program has been deliberate about defining what qualifies as getting credit. Need to try to report what meets these criteria. Need to recognize that some benefits are better than no benefits.
- v. Sandra Stuart: For tree planting, the Ch. Bay Buffer program is proving to be very popular -- already ahead of projection in Rockbridge County. Includes 100 % cost of trees and planting, 3 years maintenance. Can we model same thing with the BMPs that are part of a sequestration?
1. James Martin: this is not out of line with existing cost share programs. Nonprofits have more flexibility than federal programs. Need to bring together every implementation partner to the table to support the ag and developed lands community in this.
 2. Kristen Hughes Evans: The maintenance agreement part of the buffer establishment is really helpful in getting farmers to “yes” on buffers. This would be a great model to replicate elsewhere in the region.
 3. David Bryan: You are correct, James. FR-3 is our forest buffer offering on the state side. It pays 95% plus an incentive depending on what is planted (i.e. pine vs hardwood) and length of lifespan (i.e. 10 versus 15 years). Our Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) voted last week to recommend additional incentives for this practice. --- NRCS, non-profits and private entities also have similar offerings.

Coalition and Steering Committee updates

- I. DCR integration of soil health (Robert Shoemaker, Amy Walker)
 - a. Whole Farm Approach just went through TAC (Technical Advisory Council) and sought input from some Coalition partners around potential soil health pieces. Goals added to increase biomass, promote biological diversity, and protect water

quality. Incentives include funding for leaving cover crops on the ground longer (up to June 1st).

- b. Robert is also working on incorporating soil health in a pasture management bundle - will be presented to TAC in next round and potential available to farmers in FY23/24.

II. Soil health assessment (Rory Maguire, Wade Thomason, Lydia Fitzgerald)

- a. Lydia Fitzgerald, Integrated Conservation Agronomist: Working with Chris Lawrence/NRCS via a USDA grant to Virginia Tech as an integrated conservation agronomist.
 - i. Hosting web-based learning platform (Soil Health Assessment Workgroup or SHAW) every other Friday. The goal is to learn from NRCS, VT, and other partners. Next meeting is Fri Nov 12th - reach out to Lydia or Chris to join.
 - ii. Soil Health Scorecard: were heavily focused on this in the beginning of meetings. There are now a couple of drafts, and now looking through them to see what will work best. Depends on what they are doing with the results of the scorecard and how this integrates with the workflow. This will not be a universal scorecard that meets everyone's needs.
- b. Dr. Ryan Stewart (VT): Engaged in dynamic soils property project with NRCS, looking at pasture management and working with Carl Peacock in the coastal plains to compare soil samples. How pasture management affects different soil properties. Mix of lab and field work.
- c. Dr. Rory Maguire: Supervising soil health lab at VT. Soil nutrient recommendation through soil sampling, but there are no actual soil health tests. Trying to look at specific types of soil health assessments to define nitrogen recommendations. Using old tests to define what a healthy soil is. 15 sites across VA for these tests and will be testing again over the next couple years.
- d. From Chris Lawrence: A "MUST-READ": "The 'soil health' metaphor: Illuminating or illusory?". It argues that the very wide breadth of the term "soil health" offers many pros but also some real risks/cons. Reading this will help you better understand why VA NRCS won't soon come up with a universal "soil health" test or score card that makes sense for every partner and purpose. Posted here or from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0038071721000390>.

III. 4 The Soil Awareness Initiative (Eric Bendfeldt, VCE)

- a. 4 The Soil: An awareness initiative based on idea that people can be FOR the soil (instead of against something). Based off the work of NRCS of distilling down the 4 main principles of soil health. Developed an ambassador toolkit that can be used for social marketing.
- b. Most recently through additional funding through the Agua Fund, have launched podcast: "4 The Soil: A Conversation." 2 episodes so far. Conversational story-based approach. Have 48 episodes over the course of the next few years. Been able to hire Kayleigh Heather to help Mary and Eric to continue to build out

resources and to come up with a directory to highlight resources and stories. World Soil Day is the early part of December. Mary and others are trying to put together events to highlight 4theSoil. Welcomes any ideas for this day.

IV. Farmer mentoring (Becky Szarzynski)

- a. Recap on the program - a learning model where farmers are learning from their fellow farmers. Matched experienced grazing partners with new or beginning farmers based on location and goals. Helps new grazers successfully implement grazing practices on a long-term basis. 4 mentors were matched with 6 mentees over the past year. Hosted a pasture walk on her farm in late July to bring together the larger group. Did a cattle move and analyzed the soil in the pasture. Started a VFGC group on Facebook. Working on a short 5-7 minute video showcasing the mentee and mentor farmers sharing their experiences and stories.
- b. Lydia is also leading some mentor working alongside of Becky with VT.

Moving Toward Collective Impact: A Panel Discussion with Regional Soil Health Funders

- I. Moderated: Kristen Saacke Blunk; Panelists: Jake Reilly, Jamie Baxter, Chris Lawrence
- II. Jake Reilly: Director of Chesapeake Programs, direct and manage the grant program supporting restoration of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Possible significant increase in funding over the next year. Oversaw the White House budget for conservation under the Farm Bill.
- III. Chris Lawrence: State Cropland Agronomist, NRCS. An implementation agency but also does funding. 18 years ago Chris was hired as an extension agent and was interested in soil quality. Farmer enthusiasm is key. Helped develop a formal soil health strategy for NRCS. Soil health is a broad term that keeps getting broader and broader.
- IV. Jamie Baxter: Director of Chesapeake Bay Funders Network. Work with 50 grant makers that address a range of environmental issues (not a funder themselves). Educating the funding community and inspiring collaborating responses. A movement much bigger than TMDL and on a much longer timeline than 2025.
- V. Discussion:
 - a. Funders started meeting a few years back to think about the needs for investing in soil health, some thought on how NFWF entered in the arena:
 - i. Jake: All the practices are in the WIPs, the ability to layer practices on top of one another is a no brainer. Normalize the key soil health principles as being standard practices. Does not have a big endowment, but soil health is based on a corporate partner who was really interested in sustainability. Developed the Chesapeake Soil Health summit where the funders pulled together to see where the state of soil health was and helped land 3 pots of money.
 - ii. Chris: NFWF project has been amazing for him in bringing Mary Sketch to VA and other resources. Through this process, have come to understand how much work it takes to bring together and align projects so we are truly collaborative to boost each other. Takes effort from every partner.

- iii. Jamie: An area where the coalition should spend time thinking about. Coming together to find a shared goal is important to bring everyone together to do the work. Depending on what you are trying to do, there are different types of collaboration. There organizations/coalitions, on-line organizations, chapter-based, networks, etc. Each structure is good at some things, but not good at others. It's important to spend time on the model based on the goal.
 - 1. Collective impact:
 - a. Joint plan and shared measurement
 - b. Centralized governance group and back bone
 - c. Funds to grow org
 - d. Hard to grow
 - 2. Systems Change Network:
 - a. Self-organizing: many people initiating short term collaborative experimental projects and deep learn
 - b. Network governance/decision-making decentralized and participative
 - c. Money in innovation
- iv. Kristen: Collaboratives have moved towards the connect, align, produce model. Moving into the place where you are producing, but it is a circle where you are going back to each and going through the cycle again.
- v. Jake: Learning that has been happening between CBFN and NFWF and has helped to inform the value of forced collaboration. Takes a lot of work and time to put those pieces in place. Shift to collaboration has been the key to scaling the BMPs across the watershed. It is paying off. This is about working better together, and takes time and effort, but pays off in the end. Going to be continuing in the collaborative space in the long haul. Doesn't just have to be through the Coalition, but can be across state lines and continue to scale. (Stanford Social Innovation Review article on Collective Impact: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact)
- vi. Chris: Soil health has come to be such a broad term that it does not have a scientific meaning, but is a metaphor. There has been an explosion with the use of the term soil health. Becomes much more trans-disciplinary. Need to figure out the purpose of the coalition and have to get back to the basics of soil health and focus on what we want to work on which will shape the coalition.
- vii. Brent Wills (in chat): "Collective impact" is technically what we soil practitioners are trying to get our clients to understand regarding the soil-plant system. The symbiotic relationships involved in soil health embody what collective impact means on a ground-level scale. Very analogous and pertinent.
- viii. Jamie: these collaborative models can exist together. There is a time and a place for each of them around a shared goal. As you evolve, the more

you can recognize and be intentional about it, the more effective the work can be.

- ix. Jake: This work is continuous and is never done. Generational issue to focus on. This is fundamentally changing the way that people grow food and how we can make food and fiber restorative to the planet. NFWF is ready and willing to invest. Trying to impact behavior on the ground that defines the goals and know they're done with that when they hit those goals. Think big and act locally.
- x. When the network takes actions on the edges and the staff behind the scenes has little to do with it, he can feel accomplished. Getting a smaller group together from the bigger group to put together a grant, is another accomplishment.

Feeding Our Cultural Soils: A Conversation with Ari Weinzweig

- I. Ari Weinzweig, Founder of Zingerman's Delicatessen and Community of Businesses in Ann Arbor, MI. Speaker, author, business leader.
- II. Eric Bendfeldt and Mary Sketch recently had opportunity to talk with Ari for the "4 The Soil: A Conversation"
- III. 10 minute clip from Ari Weinzweig's portion of the 4theSoil podcast.
 - a. Ari's metaphor of healthy organizations as healthy soils:
<https://www.zingtrain.com/blog/another-deep-look-at-how-we-can-continue-to-enhance-our-cultural-soils/>