



The Virginia Soil Health Coalition Progress and Status June 2022

Over the past year and a half, the Virginia Soil Health Coalition has gone through a foundational phase of development and growth that included formalizing the structure of the Coalition, increasing the number and diversity of partners involved, developing a Steering Committee, launching a soil health awareness initiative, and forming a farmer mentoring network, among other activities. Over the year, the Coalition has placed a heavy emphasis on outreach and education, greatly expanding the network of partners involved in the work and increasing coordination, collaboration, and communication among partners. In 2022, we plan to undergo an in-depth, facilitated strategic planning process to think through further needs and opportunities to advance soil health across Virginia.

Progress has included:

I. Coalition Building and Collaboration

- a. Brought on Coordinator in January 2021.
- b. Formalized structure of Coalition as a broad network with a Steering Committee to provide guidance and leadership.
- c. Organized Steering Committee that meets monthly to provide strategic guidance and direction for the Coalition.
- d. Increased number of partners from 12 to 30 in first 18-months
- e. Established quarterly meeting structure of Virginia Soil Health Coalition with four meetings so far and average attendance of 90 participants.
- f. Monthly Virginia soil health newsletter.
- g. Developed Coalition website including resource list, calendar of events, and more.

II. Soil Health Implementation through Education, Demonstration and Peer-to-Peer Mentoring

- a. Expanded the network of farmer-to-farmer mentoring across Virginia, led by Virginia Forage and Grassland Council, The Virginia No-Till Alliance, Virginia Tech/Virginia Cooperative Extension, and Virginia NRCS.
- b. Hired Mentor Coordinator, Becky Szarzynski, to use her experience leading the Virginia Forage and Grassland Council's mentoring program to help advance the mentoring efforts of other partner organizations.
- c. Ongoing training and educational events led by diverse partners including the Virginia Association of Biological Farmers, Common Grain Alliance, Virginia No-Till Alliance, Virginia Forage and Grassland Council, and Virginia NRCS among others.

III. Leveraging Market Opportunities and Economic Drivers

- a. Launched the 4 The Soil Awareness Initiative (www.4thesoil.org) which seeks to amplify and complement on-going soil health messaging and educational priorities of the Virginia Soil Health Coalition and its partners. In 2021, a 4 The Soil Ambassador Toolkit was developed to share with partners for social marketing and additional outreach through Virginia Cooperative Extension, the

Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and Virginia USDA-NRCS. The 4 The Soil website has had 6,250 unique visitors, 10,800 page views, and approximately 200 pledges.

- b. Launch of "4 The Soil: A Conversation" podcast, co-hosted with Jeff Ishee of On The Farm Radio. So far there have been twelve episodes and nearly 2,000 downloads.
- c. Weekly 4 The Soil workgroup meetings engaging diverse partners.
- d. Regarding the financial aspects of soil health, Dr. Kurt Stephenson and colleagues with support of the Agua Fund authored three publications on soil carbon credit status in Virginia, the complex relationship of soil health, nutrient management and water quality, and a financial analysis of soil health practices for Virginia cash grain production.
- e.

IV. Other activities

- a. Expansion of partnership between Virginia NRCS and Virginia Tech- the Soil Health & Integrated Conservation Agronomist (ICA) or "Soil Health Plus" Outreach Project- that leverages NFWF funds to hire a full-time Partnership Soil Health & Integrated Conservation Agronomist, Lydia Fitzgerald.
- b. Burgeoning partnership with Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation to explore opportunities to incorporate soil health language and practices into their programs. The Coalition, with the leadership of Robert Shoemaker, facilitated development of a matrix on soil health co-benefits of VACS practices and formation development of subcommittee of partners to inform the integration of soil health into the VACS program (series of four meetings and ongoing outreach over year to seek input on potential crop/grazing bundles).
- c. Virginia Tech hired a new grad student to complete on-farm field measurements, create educational materials, update nitrogen recommendations for healthy soils, and organize field days.
- d. Coalition partners received funding through the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Professional Development Program to develop and implement comprehensive peer-to-peer soil health training for conservation professionals and mentor farmers. The project will begin July 2022.



- The Chesapeake Bay Voluntary Agricultural BMP's Task Force completed the producer survey in December 2021. Overall, this effort concludes that participating farmers in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed have collectively implemented non-cost shared and/or previously unreported conservation practices, as follows: core nitrogen and phosphorus nutrient management (88,475 acres); supplemental nitrogen nutrient management for rate (50,547 acres), placement (40,693 acres), and timing (25,174 acres); supplemental phosphorus nutrient management for rate (34,727 acres) and placement (47,715 acres); manure incorporation/injection (2,074 acres); 23 animal waste management units serving 634,218 animals; 131 barnyard water diversion and runoff control systems impacting 187,893 animals; 13,136 acres of prescribed grazing; 8,929 acres with soil conservation and water quality plans; 115,198 acres of no till/minimum tillage practices; 15,847 acres of traditional, traditional with fall nutrients, and commodity cover crops, and; 6,434 acres of riparian buffers (inclusive of all buffer types). This information helps tell the story of the good work that Virginia's agricultural producers are doing to conserve soil and protect water quality.
- Extension Director Ed Jones announced his retirement earlier this year. A nationwide search is being conducted for the VCE Director position and four finalists have been identified. These individuals interviewed between May 24 and June 9 at the Virginia Tech campus. There were also opportunities for stakeholders to engage with the candidates in Richmond. Dr. Ray McKinnie, VSU Dean of Agriculture, has also announced his retirement. An interim Dean has been appointed.
- When all the Extension agent positions currently advertised are filled VCE will have 239 Extension agents, as follows: 102 Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR), 91 4-H, 34 Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS), and 12 FCS SNAP-Ed.



- **Training Resources Available Online** – The **Conservation Selling Skills course**, as part of DCR Conservation Planner Certification, was held virtually on June 8 from 10 am to 12 noon. This course was recorded and available online. It was conducted by former NRCS District Conservationist and farmer, Bobby Whitescarver. Course objective: Learn how to sell conservation from the farmer's perspective. Conservation is not science, it's sociology.
- **Training Resources Available Online - Urban Ag Training** was held virtually Wednesday, June 15. It was recorded and available on the VASWCD YouTube page. This training will provide awareness and information to SWCD staff and partners on the opportunities there are to support these urban farmers and communities. The idea is a greater recognition and awareness on the many partner organizations that can assist which will lead to greater coordination at the local level to provide the best available assistance to client. Speakers include but not limited to: NRCS, VSU (Small Farm Outreach Program), USDA, VCE (Master Gardeners), DOF, VASWCD.
- **June 22, 2022** – The next **VASWCD Quarterly Board meeting** is scheduled for June 22 at 9am and will be held via zoom. Meeting materials will be posted in coming weeks at <https://vaswcd.org/board-meetings>. **Register to attend the June virtual meeting at <https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUpf-mspzgvHN12tBtvO-C0YSE37kD-EYm>.**
- **June 22, 2022 – Admin/Ops Committee: Salary/Benefits Study** – Recently all districts received a survey request to participate in a Salary/Benefit/Retention study being conducted with the help of Terri Higgins, the HR Professional the VASWCD has on retainer for SWCDs. Working with Terri we are compiling all data into aggregate form to provide valuable data to districts. **Following the VASWCD Quarterly Board meeting in the AM, we are planning a 1pm Admin/Ops Committee meeting to allow Terri Higgins to present her Salary/Benefit/Retention study findings. Register at <https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZAvd-itzkrGNE02FGHQV2B6-JmLyvJH3tY>.**
- **June 24 - The Virginia Soil & Water Board** is slated to meet at Farm Bureau in West Creek. The board will be approving SWCD funding allocations, grant agreements and more. With unprecedented VACS funding available, districts will be seeking stakeholder support and assistance in reaching new producers and expanding program efforts. Districts will be holding multiple outreach events as a result. Please reach out to your local SWCD to learn more and participate or contact Kendall to help.
- **July 27 – Ag 101 Training** In Person Led by Bobby Whitescarver with limited attendance. We are requesting assistance from SWCDs and CDCs to generate a list of NEW Staff that do NOT have ANY Ag background for this training. Please reach out to Kendall Tyree with questions or interest.
- **December 4-6, 2022 - Annual Meeting** – The VASWCD Annual Meeting will return in person this coming December. Planning efforts began June 7. We are excited to be reserving time on the agenda for Soil Health Coalition efforts. If you have interest in joining the planning committee for annual meeting and other training needs please email kendall.tyree@vaswcd.org or register at <https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZ0kduurjwjiHdMon-sHUjSDLhMP7O9a104w>.



- ❖ We can still enroll people in the Ecosystem Services Market Consortium/Revolving Water Fund for this year's pilot or for next year's program. Farmers in the Shenandoah Valley can receive credits for the carbon they sequester or nutrients they retain through their production practices. This can work particularly well for those producers who are unable (can't rank high enough) or unwilling to access state/federal cost share.
- ❖ Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley's application for an INSR on behalf of the Smith Creek Watershed Partnership was selected for funding - approximately \$1mil for implementation of riparian and upland best practices on cropland and pastureland in the watershed.



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

Saving a National Treasure

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation hosted a Healthy Soils for Healthy Trees Workshop in Richmond on May 24th.

You can check out the demonstration videos [here](#) and [here](#).

You can see the slides from the presentation [here](#).

Reach out to Ann Jurczyk at AJurczyk@cbf.org with any questions.



A Modular Curriculum for Growing Food Grain for the Local Market

This two-year project, funded by Southern SARE, addresses the educational barriers to growing grain for the local market. The core feature of the project is a set of eight 60- to 90-minute classes customized to the intended audiences and held at farmer gatherings around the Mid-Atlantic. Partners on this project include Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE), Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), and the Natural Resources & Conservation Service (NRCS).

Agricultural Leadership and Development Initiative

Earlier this month, the first cohort of the Agricultural Leadership Development Initiative (ALDI) began group meetings and classes to kick off this 9 month long program!

ALDI is a partnership between Future Harvest Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture (Future Harvest), Common Grain Alliance, Fields 4 Valor, and the Million Acre Challenge. Last fall, Future Harvest was awarded a multi-year USDA 2501 Program grant to help socially disadvantaged farmers, ranchers, and foresters who have historically experienced limited access to USDA programs and services. As a partner on the grant, Common Grain Alliance will coordinate grain-related networking, training, and mentorship opportunities to support socially disadvantaged beginning farmers in the Chesapeake region

Checking In On Growing Grain

One of our earliest projects in 2022, the **“Growing Grain” - a blog exploring grain farming** is still going strong! While our lead Project Manager Heather Coiner has spent time away with her beautiful and healthy new baby, Communications & Research Manager Jillian O’Donohoe has kept the blog active. **You can find the most recent posts linked below, and we encourage you to visit the other on the blog**

Bringing Grain Into the Mid-Atlantic Local Food System Through Consumer Awareness and Market Access

This project is funded by a Farmers Market Promotion Program grant through USDA AMS. Partnering with FRESHFARM, this project aims to simultaneously increase the presence of and demand for regional grains at Mid-Atlantic farmers markets. Together with our partners and network, we will: develop marketing and branding tools to expand consumer awareness and buy-in of regional grains; increase revenue for grain farmers and processors through new direct-to-consumer market opportunities, training and technical assistance, and farmer/processor connections; and promote an equitable marketplace for regional grains within the regional food system for consumers, farmers, and processors.