

Virginia Soil Health Coalition
Meeting Minutes
Date: April 26, 2021

- I. **Welcome from the Honorable Bettina Ring, Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry**
 - a. Need to support farmers and eventually provide more funding- for healthy soils, for our environment, and our economy. How do we incentivize and help us all improve how we are doing around soil health?
 - b. Exciting to see how quickly things have evolves: how can we do more? What strategies do we have in place?
 - c. Stars aligned with Robert Bonnie/Jewel Bronaugh at the USDA→ opportunity to take advantage of
 - d. Peer learning/sharing/communication with each other is key
 - e. The sky is the limit on what we can do together!

- II. **Introduction to the Coalition**
 - a. **History (Chris Lawrence, VA NRCS)**
 - i. NRCS soil health initiative kickstarted in 2013 with a partnership emphasis from the start → asked partners to agree to four soil health principles and invited to send in a simple pledge letter.
 - ii. VSHC was informal but engaged in a lot of projects → 26 state soil health CIGs
 - b. **NFWF grant/structure (Rory Maguire, VT SPES)**
 - i. NFWF funding provided the opportunity to put the VA Soil Health Coalition together. DCR and Agua Fund provided cost share.
 - ii. Pillar 1: Partnership growth
 - iii. Pillar 2: Practice implementation through farmer-to-farmer mentoring. Farmers learn through both Extension and early-adopter farmers. Idea is to pay early-adopter farmers to coach/guide farmers.
 1. Each farmer mentor supports 5 farmers (25 farmers mentored, 5 mentors)
 2. Just hired Integrated Conservation Agronomist (through NRCS/VT grant) who will also be doing farmer mentoring
 - iv. Robert Shoemaker is liaison with DCR and exploring co-benefits between soil health and water quality in DCR cost share.
 - v. Also includes soil health metrics research (how to best measure soil health), led by Dr. Rory Maguire
 - c. **Vision, mission, common ground, and purpose**
 - i. Vision: The VSHC envisions a thriving and diverse agricultural landscape in VA that is profitable, sustainable, and resilient, now and for future generations.
 - ii. 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.

- iii. Common ground: We are committed to...
 - 1. Advancing a holistic approach to soil health through practices that sustain and regenerate the landscape
 - 2. Valuing and prioritizing the needs of Virginia's farmers
 - 3. Strengthening the resilience, productivity, and profitability of Virginia's farm economy
 - 4. Focusing on areas of alignment with a collaborative mindset
 - 5. Acknowledging different perspectives and contexts
- iv. Purpose (proposed functions of the Coalition)
 - 1. Increase communication among soil health experts, practitioners and supporters
 - 2. Increase shared knowledge of the science and practices of healthy soils
 - 3. Support farmers in their efforts to build healthy soils
 - 4. Educate decision makers and the public about healthy soil
 - 5. Advance strategies to increase

III. Partner Presentation: 4TheSoil Campaign (Eric Bendfeldt)

- a. Soil health as critical to long-term farm sustainability → Continuing to reach out to farmers and the general public is crucial
- b. NFWF funding to look at market and economic drivers around soil health with additional funding from Agua Fund and USDA local food promotion grant (2018) → trying to help local/regional farmers sell their products in local markets and communicating what farmers are doing around soil health so farmers can realize a benefit in the marketplace. Label development?
- c. 4TheSoil awareness campaign
 - i. Aims to amplify and complement existing ongoing soil health messages that are already being promoted by personalizing, humanizing and possibly popularizing soil health
 - ii. Applying a systems-level focus to increase soil organic matter
 - iii. Systems (and soils) are still very vulnerable- work to be done
 - iv. Will be using storytelling to promote soil health including potential video, podcasts, etc. → Campaign is an entry point for soil managers and the public to come together to elevate the value of healthy soil.
 - v. [4TheSoil campaign planning tool](#)
 - vi. [4TheSoil ambassador toolkit](#): conversation starter, graphics can be downloaded from Google Drive (both photo and illustrated versions of the 4 principles of soil health.)
 - vii. Call-to-action on website

IV. Partner Presentations

- a. **VA Forage and Grassland Council: Farmer-to-farmer mentoring (Becky Szarsynski)**
 - i. Works closely with JB Daniels aiming to pair experienced grazers with new or beginning grazers in the watershed to get extra support and guidance. Provides place for discussion whether mentor or mentee
- b. **American Farmland Trust: Mid Atlantic Sustainable Grazing Project (Jacob Gilley)**
 - i. Privately funded project focused in Central VA taking a holistic approach that promotes BMPs such as buffers, stream exclusion, etc. Working with partners to showcase BMPs that have many different benefits for farmers, wildlife, and soil.
 - ii. Working to leverage grazing management technology and capitalize on regenerative grazing through it.
 - iii. Grassroots Carbon- app that will be selling carbon credits to farmers who use it.
 - iv. Also looking at tracking activities through pilot producers to quantify costs of making hay, clipping pastures, and fuel usage.
 - v. Next steps: Continue compiling data and creating impactful storytelling videos that showcase their effort. Dive into livestock integration in crop rotations. Look into carbon credits to see if it is feasible for producers in the region.
- c. **Kevin Tate: Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative**
 - i. Focused in the Shenandoah Valley. Takes a two pronged approach → 1. focus on water quality BMPs and soil health BMPs. 2. Focus on protecting farmland through these practices and conservation easements
 - ii. Recently put together GIS prioritization map to maximize water quality benefits.
 - iii. Conservation easements- working on reducing cost through revolving loan fund
- d. **Chesapeake Bay Foundation (Matt Kowalski)**
 - i. Mountain to Bay Grazing Alliance (NFWF funded)- coming at BMP adoption through multiple different approaches (water quality, soil health, economic viability)
 - ii. Involved in many partnerships: 1) VA Soil Health Coalition; 2) James River Riparian Consortium; 3) Mountains to Bay Grazing Alliance; 4) Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative; 5) Million Acre Challenge
 - iii. CBF definition of regenerative agriculture to be out soon.
 - iv. Shooting for 600 acres of regenerative farming in VA
- e. **Sustainable Chesapeake: Manure injection (Sustainable Chesapeake)**
 - i. Manure injection → incentivize custom applicators through per acre basis
 - ii. Getting the manure under the surface has far more benefits than applying it to the surface. Traditionally done through tillage, but now have low disturbance manure injection technologies

- iii. Funding through NFWF → Potomoc and James River basins
 - iv. Can now apply through ag cost share
 - v. Details and how to apply: <https://www.vsdonline.com/injection.php>
- f. VA Department of Conservation and Recreation: Soil Health integration (Robert Shoemaker)**
- i. DCR cost share program historically focused on water quality and not on soil health, but obviously co-benefits.
 - ii. Early as last September started internal conversations about looking at cost share practices to see which one could move the needle.
 - iii. Developed a soil health matrix to see which VACS practices most improve soil health (qualitative not quantitative).
 - iv. Potential pilot project in near future
 - v. Next step is looking at potential of soil health bundles for a whole farm approach. Bundles would improve and document soil health improvements and have administrative benefits.
- g. VA Natural Resource Conservation Service: VA CIG (Chris Lawrence)**
- i. CIGs have helped drive soil health since 2010
 - ii. 2021 VA NRCS CIG announced: 1:1 match grant. Proposals due June 18, 2021
 - iii. Integrated approach to soil management
 - iv. Staffing shortages are key obstacles to progress → new collaborative partnership staffing strategy that would hire technical specialists and part-time farmer and field mentors. First new hire is Trevor Simmons (VT/NRCS Integrated Conservation Agronomists).
- h. Legislative update (Martha Moore and Kendall Tyree)**
- i. [Ag BMP tax credit bill](#): Bill that expands refundable tax credit (50% of first \$100,000 expended will be refunded).
 - ii. [Ag equipment tax credit bill](#): Enhanced tax credit for conservation tillage and precision ag equipment and anything that will reduce soil compaction and fertilizer/pesticide management. VSHC could assist the Commonwealth in identifying precision ag equipment that should be “certified” as eligible for participation in tax credit program.
 - iii. [Greenhouse gas inventory bill](#): Inventory on greenhouse gases- updated frequently, ag data protected.
 - iv. [Carbon sequestration bill](#): Sec of NR and Sec of Ag to convene a task force to study sequestration to report a finding before the next General Assembly session including recommended short-term and long-term benchmarks, standardize carbon levels, increase carbon sequestration, identify markets and other funding in the commonwealth. Task force has not been appointed yet.
 - v. [Ag BMP funding budget](#): Is it what we need? [Needs assessment](#) is a collaborative approach with SWCDs to see what is needed through a formula → found \$105 million is needed. Have a lot of work to be fully funded.

V. Next steps and opportunities (Mary Sketch)

a. Results from pre-meeting survey:

- i. Which topic would you be most interested in hearing/learning more about related to soil health?: 1. soil health economics, 2. soil health assessment, 3. policy, 4. farmer testimonials, 5. carbon markets.

b. Follow-up → What specific topics would you be interested? What questions do you have on these topics?

- i. More about protecting soils in urban and suburban areas
- ii. Impacts of soil health + integrated agronomy on farm profitability
- iii. How can we quantify the profitability/efficiencies for certain programs to demonstrate \$ value to growers, communities, etc.
- iv. Urban stream bank stabilization
- v. Soil health economics for commercial scale farmers
- vi. Benefits to consumers, particularly health and nutrient density of food grown on land that uses soil health principles
- vii. How to ensure that VA farmers are able to participate and engage in emerging carbon markets
- viii. Regional models for economics would be very important to produce.
- ix. Invite Dr. Elaine Ingham to talk about organic matter/soil biology
- x. Consumer and marketplace/supply chain engagement
- xi. Value in talking about what “economics” means. “Economics” can mean. We don’t need to prove that soil health pays, but we do need to put soil health promotion in language that farmer businesspeople can understand.
- xii. Invite Carbon Cycle Institute to go over training ideas (lessons learned from first nationwide rollout recently in North Carolina, using COMET, etc.)
- xiii. Training on soil health assessment for practitioners working on the ground (e.g. SWCD staff)
- xiv. Develop carbon market panel (experts from around the country)

c. Opportunities

- i. Re: soil health economics: getting farmers to share 5-year data. Within a 3-5 year period, farm operations can change dramatically e.g. related to transition to younger generation, etc. Important to understand context.
- ii. Helping folks understand the layers and limits of C sequestration vs soil health overlap is very much needed at this moment and a function the Coalition could help facilitate.
- iii. Coalition can provide a forum for ensuring as much consistency as possible in how terms (soil health, regenerative ag, etc.) are used among core partners.

d. Next steps

- i. Visit the website: www.virginiasoilhealth.org and sign up for the newsletter, check out the calendar, share your events.

- ii. Share your logo in support of the vision/mission/principles of the Coalition
- iii. Organize a discussion- we can help!
- iv. Next meeting: July 26th at 1 pm

e. Partner events

- i. April 29th: Chesapeake Bay Stakeholders Advisory Group
- ii. April 29th: Estimating the GHG benefits of NRCS's Applied Practices
- iii. April 30th: Conservation Stewardship Program Applications due
- iv. May 13th: VFGC Pasture Walk at Swallow Hill Farm
- v. May 20th: VA Soil and Water Conservation Board Meeting
- vi. June 18th: VA CIG proposal deadline
- vii. June 21st: National CIG proposal deadline.

Contact Information

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[Virginia Soil Health Coalition one-pager](#)

4TheSoil website: www.4thesoil.org