

Notes: VSHC Quarterly Meeting
June 1st, 1-3 PM

- I. **Welcome, Dr. Michael Gutter, Director, Virginia Cooperative Extension**
 - a. Background as an economist
 - b. Has been touring Virginia
 - c. Needs assessment- water and soil health on the minds of many
 - d. Invitation- let local extension office know if you want to be present at local visits.
 - e. We tend to have common goals in our heart
 - f. Importance of partnerships and networks

- II. **Panel: “Addressing the soil health technical assistance gap: Challenges and opportunities for cropping systems”**
 - a. Goal: Dig into some of the existing challenges and opportunities around technical assistance.
 - b. Panelists:
 - i. Anne Coates, Executive Director, TJSWCD
 - ii. Dwight Forrester, District Conservationist, Tappahannock, NRCS
 - iii. Dr. Sarah Hirsch, Ag Extension Agent, Maryland Cooperative Extension
 - iv. Tim Woodward Chief Operation Officer, Virginia Seed Company
 - v. Facilitated by Adrienne Kotula, Virginia Director, Chesapeake Bay Commission
 - c. Chesapeake Bay Commission did a 2018 boots on the ground report re: TA
 - d. Anne – Not as crop focused, but many of the same issues apply across the board. Do we have the staffing we need, etc. Background is in govt agencies for the most part. 12th year with districts- first part was in California.
 - e. Dwight - District Conservationist, NRCS, Tappahannock. Right in the middle of VA grain belt. Where are we with adapting and integrating new technology and having the technical staff and capabilities to bring on those people. Importance of understanding this systems management approach.
 - f. Sarah – Working on project between Extension, Sustainable Chesapeake, and Future Harvest trying to move cover cropping to the next level on the eastern shore of MD. A lot of planning protocol based on Chris Lawrence’s work. Farmers implement plan together. Use farms as field day locations. Need to talk about what IS working with TA and then can shift to where there are roadblocks.
 - g. Tim - Last 12-13 years with Tellus Agronomics consulting with farmers. Founded VA Seed Company out of understanding of benefits of cover crops for farms, but in order to be successful on farms need to focus on details of management. Shifted to just working with farmers to ag industry as a whole more largely.
 - h. Dwight and Anne- what do you feel is working in terms of spreading the word, getting TA in the field?
 - i. Anne- combination of getting the word out but geographically have a large district. So as a result have to get creative with outreach- going to their meetings, social media. If we just show up with pizza at the farm

- bureau meeting those people will tell their neighbors and farmer friends. It's not always just about the size of event- can focus on small groups of people and have a big impact.
- ii. Dwight- we do a lot of outreach that results in TA. Partnering with other organizations and agencies. Will often have folks from all agencies out on a site visit. NRCS has a 9-step conservation planning process.
 - iii. Adrienne- importance of bringing partners together and breaking bread together. That is where a lot of the work really happens.
- i. Tim and Sarah- What other innovative techniques are you using? What other concepts do you see on the forefront?
 - i. Sarah- try to do a lot of needs assessments in extension and talk with farmers on what they need the most. Some places prefer virtual some like more in-person. Meeting people where they are to get the information to them.
 - ii. Tim- we are trying to train this network of people that already interface directly on farms as part of their day-to-day—the ag retailers in the state. Focus has been trying to define value of cover crops. What specific system works and train ag retailers on HOW it's done. If we don't pay attention to the details then we don't get a result from that cover crop or not as much of a result. The devil is in the details. Really have one shot with that farmer to prove a new concept or new system.
 - j. What limitations do you see in the current system? Chokepoints?
 - i. Sarah- a lot of times the initial challenge of trying something new.
 - ii. Anne- recruitment. Finding qualified, trained staff that can either step into a position and be willing to relocate. The staffing, the people. The amount of time it takes for training.
 - iii. Dwight- Having the right people in place with the technical knowledge and background is key. Another chokepoint is quantifying the benefits of these soil health practices, setting the baseline and evaluating that from a year-to-year perspective. And often it isn't year-to-year, it is longer term.
 - iv. Tim- private- may never be a direct assistance. Requires a really high level of technical ability. Competitive advantage for ag retailers- saying that farmers are wanting this. Trying to articulate benefit to bottom lines not necessarily to water quality.
 - k. Partnerships- how can they help us enhance our TA capacity?
 - i. Dwight- allows to utilize resources from multiple places. Learn from many different perspectives this way. Ex: work with Sustainable Chesapeake on roller crimping. On the job training
 - ii. Anne- a lot of room for collaboration. It takes self-reflection- what are our strengths and what are our needs. Partnering can be scary for some especially when resources are limited. Need a lot of trust. Also not trying to duplicate what someone else is doing.

III. TA panel follow-up breakout rooms: Conversation with panelists

- a. Room 1: Anne Coates
 - i. Thomas Jefferson has the largest staff in the state for SWCD
 - ii. Some of the biggest challenges and hurdles they face with a larger staff
 - 1. Handling HR for that many employees
 - 2. Handling hiring
 - 3. How to keep valuable employees you hire and work hard to retain (retention)
 - iii. In terms of staffing capacity and challenges with the hiring process, SWCD can be more flexible- it isn't as huge of a process to hire on technical capacity
 - iv. In terms of retention, TJSWCD has sought out creative ways to add value to their positions by offering other benefits- higher pay, bonuses, days off to help with community events, etc.
 - v. Another issue is training new staff who are new to conservation work and agriculture (because finding experienced and qualified candidates is VERY challenging)
 - 1. Discussion from group on potential opportunities for the experienced staff to help train new staff.
 - vi. In terms of reaching new employees, the idea of going out to schools/colleges to recruit and educate on career opportunities
 - 1. How do we reach new students?
 - 2. What is the target group? Four-year, two-year, technical school?
 - 3. Discussion about the creation of a certification process that is a two-year degree, but would prepare you for a career in SWCD/NRCS giving you the core classes you need.
 - 4. Still issues with ensuring the new graduates have the skills they need, especially the soft skills- connecting with farmers, understanding agriculture
 - a. It is very difficult to prepare a new employee to go out to a farm, connect with the landowner, and have the employee convince the farmer (who has been doing this for years) that they should "buy in" to the package the employee is offering.
 - 5. Potential of more farm visits for field staff (utilize farmer mentors in this way?)
- b. Room 2: Dwight Forrester
 - i. Districts have more cost share than ever before, staffing has been a problem. What is the right time?
 - 1. Identified some of these issues already- on the job training and the abilities to improve working knowledge. JED training- several organizations come to these meetings. Lots of opportunities to get out and do this. Making field visits and farm visits. Identifying the gaps where staff can't answer or fill resource concerns. Employee mentoring programs.

2. Knowledge transfer is so critical. Takes hands-on training to be proficient in these areas. Coordination among all the different resources across the state.
 3. Sustainable Chesapeake is hiring on contract for those that are not able to take on another staff member for various reasons.
 4. Working together across agencies/organizations to utilize each other's specialties and strengths
- ii. Roadblocks with clients:
 1. Constraints with technology or equipment, crop management or nutrient management constraints? Identifying some of the technical resource issues, planter setup, navigating management of different species in high biodiversity situations, cost associated with that.
 2. Need to get farmers in front of farmers, small intricate things that can be disasters or the greatest things. Can get laggards on board.
 - iii. Where can the VSHC fit in, how do we keep these talks going?
 1. VSHC has been to many events around the state, keep getting farmers in front of farmers and how we can outreach and educate those and the youth are key.
- c. Room 3: Sarah Hirsch
- i. Challenge: State cost share programs incentivize rye cover crops over other mixes (e.g. grasses and legumes). This has reduced farmer interest in field trials with innovative mixes.
 - ii. Challenge: Access to equipment. Highboys, interseeders, roller/crimpers, drills- many farmers don't have access to this equipment. A rental program would be helpful.
 - iii. Challenge: Having enough TA capacity at NRCS to deliver increased funding through IRA
 - iv. Opportunity: Early mixes with radish and rye reduce N loss compared to just rye cover crops. Need to update the Bay program credit framework to support cost share rates.
 - v. Opportunity for extension and conservation district leadership in cover crop planning and training
 - vi. Safe to fail trials- allow producers to learn what can happen on the land. Provide incentive (e.g. seed).
- d. Room 4: Tim Woodward
- i. Discussion on roller crimpers- all not created equal. One was tested and didn't last well, one was too wide at 16' for easy road transport, but another was bought by a farmer and seems to be working well.
 - ii. Cover crop systems that Tim has as most successful:
 1. For corn: cereal rye and hairy vetch (hairy vetch is the best legume in our region for supplying N. Crimson clover doesn't have enough biomass to compete and has higher C:N than vetch. In spring (March) spray down the rye to let the vetch keep going and stop

- the rye getting too tall and the vetch climbing it (mess to try to plant into). Roll the vetch and plant green (within a day of rolling).
2. For soybean: Cereal rye. Plant soybean directly into standing rye, and don't crimp until soybean has emerged. Crimping will kill about 14% of soybean stand, but will avoid planter issues, as you need to plant in exactly the same direction as you crimp, so easier to crimp after planting.
 - iii. Challenge/importance of getting details of systems to farmers → Tim using agri-business providers, who are trusted providers for most farmers. He said some farmers contract directly and the agribusiness will do all the cover crop planting. Others buy the seed and are advised how to manage the system.

IV. 4 The Soil: Updates and Listening Sessions

- a. Updates: continuing to push out biweekly podcast (check out wherever you get podcasts), biweekly newsletter, the pledge, blog posts, and other outreach and education. Also designed new coloring book- email Mary if want hard copies or pdf version. Planning more outreach related to the coloring book and characters in it.
- b. Social Impact Studios has been working on 4 The Soil from the beginning. They also designed the Buy Fresh, Buy Local.
- c. 4 The Soil is a concept that is designed to engage people in different ways that can then lead to deeper engagement in different ways. That is really where we are with 4 The Soil.
- d. Now at a point that is parallel to the tracks of strategic planning that the Coalition is doing
- e. 4 The Soil as an entry way for folks- for folks deeply involved but also people who really have no idea.
- f. How do we grow interest and connection to importance of soil?
- g. Project on the docket for this year- combination of a discovery focused listening sessions which also in and of themselves are awareness raisers of 4 The Soil. 3-5 listening sessions on Zoom for stakeholders, farmers, different segments. What do people need in order to message and talk about all the things they are having to juggle (e.g. as farmers)? We would be holding space first and foremost to hear about the needs from these audiences- what are your challenges and where does communication and marketing fit into all you have to do in your day-to-day existence.
- h. Working into those listening sessions- how can 4 The Soil be leveraged to help whatever those challenges are. What do they need and how can that be addressed? Giving people a toolkit to keep the conversation going and feel like they aren't just stuck in the middle.
- i. Goal is to add value to something. Communication best practices, collaborative skills all come out of this. How to talk about soil health both from the more basic and the more advanced approaches.

- j. Sessions recorded and will have a big report.
- k. Compile around common themes
- l. Will also be analyzing reach of 4 The Soil

V. Announcement and closing

- a. Check out virginiasoilhealth.org for calendar of upcoming events.
- b. Coalition has been hosting training field days for practitioners- one in July still has a few spaces left.