Halifax SWCD Newsletter

Fall 2016

We work with the people who work the land.

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Larry Layman—Vice Chairman
Bruce Pearce
Bobby Hall
Jason Fisher—VCE Appointment
Blair Hall—Associate
Hudson Reese—Associate

Staff:
Rick Brown—Conservation Specialist
Janice Jackson—Administrative/
Technical Assistant
Todd Puckett—Education & Outreach Specialist

Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land. -Aldo Leopold

Board of Directors– Jason Fisher, Larry Layman, Bruce Pearce, Page Wilkerson, and Bobby Hall– Blair Hall and Hudson Reese not pictured.

Halifax SWCD is pleased to be providing you with our 1st newsletter. This year it was necessary for us to develop a strategic plan for 2016-2020. In preparation for that we sent out over 500 surveys to ask landowners in Halifax Co. about the services we provide and what we could do better for the community. One of the main responses from those surveys was that we provide more information about programs and activities that are going on with the SWCD. This newsletter is a result of that request. It has been something that has been mentioned multiple times within the SWCD over the past few years but never put as a priority until now. We plan to start by sending these out semi-annually and if the response is good then we may make them more frequent. Our goal is to provide a quality publication that informs the residents of Halifax Co. on what's going on with the SWCD and any relevant current issues that we feel like need to be brought to your attention.

Since 1967, Halifax SWCD has been working in Halifax Co. to help develop programs to promote soil and water conservation. Our current programs are vast and diverse containing basic technical assistance on agronomy and conservation issues and grant programs that provide cost-share to implement best management practices. Along with these technical aspects, we provide programs focused on youth and adult conservation education in the schools and community. The focus of our agriculture programs over the past few years has been on stream exclusion and soil health. In 2013, the Virginia Agriculture BMP Cost-share Program (VACS) began providing 100% cost-share for stream exclusion across Virginia. This caused many livestock producers across the state to seek funding through this program. After sign up was complete, it was estimated that there had been approximately $80 million in sign-up for stream exclusion across the state. In Halifax, we have had over $1.1 million in sign-up since the beginning of the 100% cost-share. While this program has been great at getting people interested in stream exclusion, it has caused some problems with getting these applications funded. Generally, Halifax SWCD has received around $180,000 in cost-share annually to implement the entire VACS program which includes stream exclusion, grassed waterway, cover crop, and forestry planting. Funding this backlog of stream exclusion applications along with providing funding for current non-stream exclusion practices has been difficult. We have been fortunate that as of June 30, 2016 we have been able to fund all but just over $350,000 of the stream exclusion projects while still being able to provide over $60,000 to cropland and forestry practices. This has been possible due to the release of additional funds from Richmond to help alleviate the backlog along with the Halifax SWCD Board of Directors wanting to ensure that all of the funds aren't used going to stream exclusion when there are other conservation needs in the county. We hope to be able to continue to provide funds for all conservation concerns in Halifax County even in a climate of high demand and limited funding for conservation best management practices.

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EQIP and BMP Funds Help Conner's Grazing System

By Raymond Cocke, NRCS District Conservationist

For many years the cattle grazing the pastures on Willie Conner's farm located on Abbott Hill Road were obtaining water from ponds. These watering sources, provided plenty of water; however, they were not positioned to provide for consistent forage utilization. Additionally; ponds often do not provide the best water quality due to livestock access, manure, urine and other related contaminates.

Another issue expressed by Mr. Conner and his wife was the need to have to break ice during the winter months to provide water for his Angus beef cattle, and concern for his safety as well as the cattle around the icy water. Mr. Conner contacted the Halifax Soil and Water Conservation District and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to meet on the farm, discuss his concerns and evaluate his grazing system. A conservation plan was developed and cattle waterers, livestock pipeline and fencing were recommended. Financial assistance was secured through the Virginia Best Management Practices (BMP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to help with installation costs.

Six troughs were properly located and pipeline installed to provide a source of good quality water and to allow for improved forage utilization. Fencing was an integral component to improve water quality and was constructed to exclude cattle access to the ponds and Mill Branch. Five pastures were also divided with interior fencing to develop nine smaller paddocks for improved rotational grazing and forage utilization.

Mr. Conner's concern for his livestock farm provided an opportunity to combine technical and financial assistance available through the Halifax SWCD and the NRCS to implement a grazing system to improve his cattle operation while also improving water quality and forage.

Cheap Wildlife Habitat Creation

By: Lorien Koontz

There are numerous cheap ways you can create wildlife habitat on your property. The main goal is to farm ugly… ideal habitat isn't found in neatly mowed fescue fields; it's found in the chaotic brambles, thickets, and weedy grasses often found in areas that have been "let go". Areas like these are vital to numerous species of wildlife including pollinators, songbirds, rabbits, and quail. You can create great habitat simply through stacking up debris into brush piles along the edges of the woods, not mowing or cropping directly up to the forest edge; and allowing field edges and fence rows to grow wild.

As seen in these photos, the landowner did some clearing within a right-of-way and used the debris to create brush piles along the forest edge. Brush piles and thickets are necessities when it comes to wildlife habitat. Rabbits will eat the bark off of the limbs all winter long. Quail will spend the majority of their winter and summer days hiding under piles for safety from predators and weather. Songbirds will use these areas for nests as well.

The next time a tree falls on your property, decide if you need to remove it or if you can just leave it alone and allow the surrounding area to go fallow around it. If it must be removed, use the smaller limbs to create a brush pile for free wildlife habitat!

Own land? Want more advice regarding wildlife habitat creation? Contact Private Lands Wildlife Biologist, Lorien Koontz at 540-315-0074 or Lorien.koontz@va.usda.gov to schedule a site visit or to receive more information on wildlife habitat creation.

SWCD Sponsors Two County Producers to Attend VA Forage and Grassland Council Grazing School

Two livestock producers from Halifax County participated in the 2016 Virginia Forage and Grassland Council Grazing School held on May 2 and 3 in Raphine, VA at McCormick Farms. This program, which is put on by Virginia Cooperative Extension, USDA and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, teaches producers the effective use of grazing systems and how to implement grazing best management practices on their farms. Ricky Pool and Joe Wilkerson were sponsored by Halifax Soil & Water Conservation District to attend the event. This sponsorship is an effort by Halifax SWCD to give producers in Halifax Co. an opportunity to attend quality agricultural and conservation programs across the state. While attending the grazing school the producers learned about plant growth, grazing management, plant identification, managing forage supply, and forage quality along with developing a grazing plan for their operation. Grazing is seen my most researchers as the predominant way to produce livestock in Virginia for an economic and conservation standpoint. Research has shown that when using proper grazing techniques including not overgrazing, allowing rest periods and proper soil fertility on pastures producers can graze year round when using adequate stocking rates. Even if you are not able to graze year round, grazing late into the winter is preferred as opposed to feeding supplemental feed such as hay. It is estimated that stockpiled tall fescue can have better nutritional value and cost around one-third that of good quality hay. Any producer who may have questions about their current grazing practices or may like to attend programs like this one please contact Halifax SWCD.

Marketing Assistance Available for 2016 Wheat, Other Crops in Halifax County

The 2014 Farm Bill authorized 2014-2018 crop year Marketing Assistance Loans (MALs) and Loan Deficiency Payments (LDPs).

MALs and LDPs provide financing and marketing assistance for wheat, as well as other commodities such as feed grains, soybeans and other oilseeds, pulse crops, rice, peanuts, cotton, wool and honey. MALs provide producers interim financing after harvest to help them meet cash flow needs without having to sell their commodities when market prices are typically at harvest-time lows.

A producer who is eligible to obtain an MAL, but agrees to forgo the loan, may obtain an LDP if such a payment is available.

To be eligible for an MAL or an LDP, producers must have a beneficial interest in the commodity, in addition to other requirements. A producer retains beneficial interest when control of and title to the commodity is maintained. For an LDP, the producer must retain beneficial interest in the commodity from the time of planting through the date the producer filed Form CCC-633EZ (page 1) in the FSA County Office. For more information, producers should contact their local FSA county office or view the LDP Fact Sheet.

Central VA Producer Support Grant Awarded by Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission

Livestock producers in fourteen Central/Southside Virginia Counties are eligible for matching grants this year under a program funded by the Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission. The Central Virginia Producer Support Grant Program offers producers in a 14-county region an opportunity to apply for a cost share incentive of up to $3,300 per producer. This project includes the counties of Amelia, Appomattox, Bedford, Brunswick, Buckingham, Campbell, Charlotte, Cumberland, Halifax, Lunenburg, Mecklenburg, Nottoway, Pittsylvania, and Prince Edward. The grant focuses on three components those being; Hay Wrappers, Creep Feeders/ Mix Wagons & Cold Storage facilities thereby, enhancing farm profitability with corresponding benefits to the region's overall economy. Cost share funds will be available to agricultural producers who meet all eligibility requirements.

The first two rounds of applications have been received and approved. There are **funds available for additional applications.** Interested local agricultural producers are encouraged to contact ANR Extension Agent Rebekah Slabach for additional information at 434-476-2147. Producers interested in applying for funding must complete an information session with the local Virginia Cooperative Extension Agent. Grants will only be awarded on a one-time basis per producer and/or per farm.

Local Students Attend 16th Annual Watershed Adventure Camp

The Halifax Soil and Water Conservation District sponsored six local students in the 16th Annual Watershed Adventure Camp at Staunton River Battlefield State Park, held June 20-24, 2016. A total of twenty-one students from the Southside, Lake Country, and Halifax Soil and Water Conservation Districts attended this five-day program which was intended to spark an interest in environmental stewardship and to give a basic foundation in environmental sciences. Valuable assistance came from the Department of Forestry, Virginia Association Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, Department of Conservation and Recreation, Dominion Virginia Power, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Students were chosen based upon the submission of applications stating their interest and experience in environmental issues. The curriculum of this fun and educational week included: watershed study and planning, Agricultural Best Management Practices, soils, forestry, pollination, wildlife, stream quality surveying, biological and chemical water monitoring, Clover Power Plant tour, microscopy, and plant identification. The grand finale of the week was a canoe trip down a local section of the Staunton River.

The Watershed Adventure Camp was administered cost-free to the students, lunches, snacks, drinks, travel and incidental expenses were made possible through monetary donations from Benchmark Bank-Kenbridge, Charlotte County Farm Bureau, ColonialAG Education Foundation Inc., Comfort Systems, Drs. Campbell and Rutherford, DDS, Mecklenburg County Farm Bureau, Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative, Morgan Lumber Co., Owen Fencing LLC, R O Harrell, Inc., Spaulding Equipment, Tri-County Ford Inc., Trottinridge Commercial.

The students from Halifax County that attended the Camp include: William Anderson, John Berneche, Tyler Collins, Alexandria Hopkins, Dylan Love, Conner McDowell. Each year the Halifax Soil and Water Conservation District chooses up to ten fourth/fifth grade students to attend the Watershed Adventure Camp. If you are interested in attending the Watershed Adventure Camp in the future, please contact Halifax Soil and Water Conservation District at 434-476-7923.

Agriculture Strategic Plan for Halifax Co.

By: Kimley Blanks, Halifax County, Ag. Development Director

Halifax County Agriculture Development with the generous support of the Halifax Farm Bureau was awarded a grant to develop a strategic plan for agriculture and forestry in the county.

Halifax County is a community with a vibrant heritage anchored in agriculture. In order to serve the producers and residents of the county, a strategic plan for agriculture in Halifax County is overdue. The plan will be used to develop or expand production opportunities for the producers, encourage the youth to enter the agriculture field as a career, increase awareness of developing markets, and explicitly define a plan of action for the agriculture community to follow.

The cornerstone of the economy of Halifax County has been and continues to be the agriculture and forestry industry. In recent years the shifting landscape has led to changing demographics, diminishing options, and increasing pressure for producers to identify and adapt to alternative opportunities. The County of Halifax recognizes the value of agriculture and forestry businesses, and believes a strategic plan focusing on developing opportunities for these industries and highlighting the economic impact will result in renewed interest in developing and supporting our agriculture community is a priority.

The experience and knowledge base in the agriculture community is abundant. This study will take this into account and input from the producers and agriculture stakeholders will be vital to provide accurate and relevant information to determine the strengths, weaknesses and realistic potential of the agricultural community. The Virginia Tech Department of Economic Development has been hired to work with the grant committee to develop the plan.

The grant committee and consultant will work closely with the public and private sector partners in accomplishing the goal of this project. There will be several community meetings throughout the county in November for all stakeholders in agriculture and forestry. The exact dates and locations are:

-Thursday, November 3 at 7 pm – North Halifax Fire Department
-Thursday, November 10 at 7pm – Mary Bethune Office Complex
-Monday, November 14 at 7 pm – Virgilina Fire Department

This is your opportunity you be heard and to be a part of the solution. This undertaking is important and judicious as Halifax County is an agricultural community in transition and the resulting plan could serve as a roadmap to direct future endeavors.

Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Virginia Cooperative Extension to Launch Southern Virginia Pasture Infrastructure Program Funded by Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission

Halifax County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) was awarded $161,778 by the Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission for its Agribusiness project titled *Southern Virginia Pasture Infrastructure Program (SVPIP)*. The program is a joint effort between Halifax, Lake Country and Southside SWCDs, Virginia Cooperative Extension and Halifax County Agricultural Development covering the following eight counties: **Amelia, Brunswick, Charlotte, Halifax, Lunenburg, Mecklenburg, Nottoway, and Prince Edward**. SVPIP utilizes a 25% cost-share incentive to encourage producers to establish new pasture and increase the ability of livestock producers to implement rotational grazing, along with converting endophyte-infected tall fescue pastures into novel-endophyte tall fescue or warm season grasses. The primary goal of the program is to install practices that increase the ability of producers to graze their livestock (cattle, goats, sheep) more efficiently. The fencing portion of the program is based around increasing the number of grazing acres and the ability to intensively manage livestock for enhanced forage utilization. The conversion of traditional endophyte infected tall fescue pastures into novel-endophyte tall fescue or warm season grass pastures will further enhance grazing efficiency and livestock productivity. By implementing these practices, producers will improve utilization of pasture and decrease reliance on supplemental feed, resulting in an increase in net farm income. By increasing herd efficiency, this project allows producers to capitalize on greater profitability. In times where cattle markets have been unpredictable, this program plans to educate on and implement practices that have been continuously proven to have high returns on investment. Along with this, consumer demand for locally raised, grass-finished or pasture raised beef is rising, creating a need for more grazing acreage to finish livestock. Goat and lamb meat is an emerging market and price and demand for these products are increasing to meet consumer needs of the east coast metropolitan areas. Southern Virginia is ideally located 800 miles from 75% of the U.S. population, allowing us to take advantage of these value-added markets.

For additional information about the program or the orientation sessions, producers should contact their local SWCD or VCE office.

The Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission is a 28-member body created by the 1999 General Assembly. Its mission is the promotion of economic growth and development in tobacco-dependent communities, using proceeds of the national tobacco settlement. To date, the Commission has awarded 1,940 grants totaling more than $1 billion across the tobacco region of the Commonwealth, and has provided $309 million in indemnification payments to tobacco growers and quota holders. For information on the Commission's history, mission, funding programs and recent grant awards, visit our website at www.tic.virginia.gov or call toll free 877-807-1086.

Halifax SWCD Welcomes Todd Puckett as Education and Outreach Specialist

Halifax SWCD is proud to announce the hiring of Todd Puckett as the Education and Outreach Specialist. This is a part-time position that was created to help increase the influence of the SWCD in the community and school system. The primary role of this position will be to provide educational support to Halifax Co. schools for natural resource education programing. This position will also include community outreach for non-ag conservation issues such as stormwater runoff, urban conservation, and water quality improvement.

Upcoming Events:

October 24 - Flue-Cured Tobacco Curing Efficiency Meeting - Chase City
October 26 - Forage Management Meeting - Meherrin River Hunt Club
November 3 - Halifax Ag Strategic Plan Meeting - North Halifax VFD
November 3 - Regional Beef Conference (BQA Recert)- Rustburg Ruritan Club
November 6 - Halifax Ag Breakfast Series (Topic: Livestock)
November 7 - Regional Cattle Marketing Workshop - ODAC - Chatham
November 9 - Halifax SWCD Awards Banquet
November 10 - Halifax Ag Strategic Plan Meeting - Mary Bethune
November 14 - Halifax Ag Strategic Plan Meeting - Virgilina VFD
December 6 - Nutrient Management for Livestock Operations- SPAREC
December 7 - Halifax Ag Breakfast Series (Topic: Ag. Programs)
December 15 - Stockpile Forage Field Day - Locust Level Farm
January 9-11 - VA Biological Farmers Conference
January 11 - Halifax Ag Breakfast Series (Topic: Pesticides)

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