

**Buffalo Creek, Colliers, and Cedar Creek: Agricultural Working Group Meeting**  
**May 8, 2014**  
**Effinger Fire Hall**

*NOTE: A sign in sheet was not circulated during the meeting so a complete participants list is not available.*

Nesha McRae, from the VA Department of Environmental Quality began the meeting with a general discussion about agriculture in the region. Participants agreed that there has not been much change in farming and land use in Rockbridge County recently. A few farms have been divided into smaller parcels for homes and farmettes. Some farmland is leased through long term leases. Most of the farmers who are leasing land also own land nearby. There is a very high rate of land conservation (easements) in Rockbridge County and even new land owners who are not actively farming are largely committed to keeping their land in agriculture. Some children are returning home to farm after going off to school, so there are some younger farmers in the area, but not many. Generally speaking, the smaller farmettes or hobby farms are well managed. These are generally sheep and horse farms. Fox hunting remains popular in the county. The Rockbridge Hunt is a popular organization for local fox hunters.

The group discussed strategies to get the word out to the agricultural community regarding financial assistance for Best Management Practices (BMPs) and the existence of conservation programs. One participant noted that he did not like when scare tactics were used. For example, he has heard people say that farmers better hurry up and install BMPs now while the money is there; otherwise they will have to pay for everything on their own when BMPs become mandatory. Confidence and trust were noted as key components to working with the agricultural community. Several participants stated that they prefer to see things in writing regarding financial assistance. There is some skepticism about these programs and the financial assistance that is available. Having commitments made in writing will help to alleviate those concerns. The financial benefits of implementing BMPs need to be stressed in communications with farmers. The availability of new technology should also be integrated into promotion of BMPs, particularly to younger farmers. Concrete economics are very important and should be clearly spelled out in promotional materials. Several suggestions were made regarding ways to distribute information including: churches, newspaper columns (should be submitted by different people on a regular basis), The Weekender, Farm Credit Newsletter and Knowledge Center (Matt L. is the contact), Ruritan clubs, and the Co-Op bulletin board. It was also noted that there is an active forestry group through Dabney Lancaster Community College. Insurance agents were identified as a good potential partner in outreach as well. Many of these programs are confusing and intimidating. Good technical staff is needed to explain things and simplify all of these programs and paperwork. There remains a group of farmers who just are not reachable. They do not participate in these sorts of meetings or in local organizations. It was suggested that if community leaders participate, then others may follow. These key decision makers should be convinced of the benefits of BMPs first.

The group moved on to discuss livestock stream exclusion practices and associated maintenance concerns. It was noted that farmers may be able to get some assistance from the Soil and Water Conservation District to put their fence back up if it washes out. It will just depend on the availability of cost share funds. The Flexible Fencing Program that was implemented in Augusta and Rockingham Counties was discussed as a way to get more farmers to put up fences. The contract periods for these

projects are only five years compared to 10 or 15 with some state and federal programs. In addition, the fencing materials are not as expensive to replace if the fence washes out. This program is supported through private funds from the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network. One participant explained that with farming, cash flow is more uncertain. If a fence washes out when cash flow is down, that could be a real problem for a farmer. A rainy day fund or some sort of insurance for fencing was identified as a good way to address this problem.

The group discussed different fencing programs and fencing setback requirements. One participant said that they did not think anyone in the watershed would be willing to put in a 100 foot buffer. A 35 foot buffer would be possible, and some would consider the 10 foot setback fencing. Fencing out the smaller creeks in the watershed will be an issue. The size of farms, slope, and the amount of land that they have next to the stream needs to be considered. If a farmer has a number of small creeks running across their farm, it may not be possible for them to fence out all of the streams. Maintaining wells is also a concern. The group discussed allowing limited access points to the stream in case wells malfunctioned. Headwaters Soil and Water Conservation District is currently looking at the use of existing technology to create alerts for farmers when a well is not working.

The group discussed good meeting locations and times. Evening was identified as the best time for meetings, preferably 7:00. It was suggested that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of each month be avoided. The Effinger Fire Hall was identified as a good meeting location as well.