

Buffalo Creek, Colliers, and Cedar Creek: Agricultural Working Group Meeting #2
Palmer Community Center
June 25, 2014

Participants

Tommy Harris	Kermit Rockett	Phillip Hurst
Sandra Stuart	Louis Eaton	Chris Mihalkovic
Barbara Dowell	Will Harris	Nesha McRae
Marty Rockett	Mack Hamilton	Lisa Beckstrom

Nesha McRae, from the VA Department of Environmental Quality began the meeting by reviewing main points from the last meeting held on May 8, 2014 at the Effinger Fire Hall. During this meeting, concerns were expressed that efforts to restore the Chesapeake Bay would infringe on private property rights if goals were not met for livestock exclusion. Nesha emphasized that livestock exclusion is a voluntary measure, and that it will not be required through the water quality improvement plan. In addition, an excerpt from the Commonwealth's Watershed Implementation Plan was circulated to the group, which outlined a contingency plan if milestones were not met. Contingencies did not include mandatory livestock exclusion or other requirements that would impede on property rights. Nesha explained the differences between the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Implementation Plan and the proposed Buffalo Creek, Colliers, and Cedar Creek Water Quality Improvement Plan. The Chesapeake Bay is impaired due to nutrient and sediment loading whereas Buffalo, Colliers, and Cedar Creeks are impaired by bacteria. In addition, Colliers Creek has an aquatic life impairment that has been attributed to excess sediment in the creek. Both plans are similar in their goal of restoring these waterways, but the latter will solely address local water quality using solutions vetted by the local community. It was also noted that based on an update provided in a recent report by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Virginia has exceeded the livestock stream exclusion goal established for 2015 in the Watershed Implementation Plan.

Some participants expressed concerns regarding chemicals sprayed along road rights-of-way (R/W) near the creeks and potential effects on aquatic life. Nesha noted that she had been contacted by a local resident regarding a specific location in Collierstown where herbicide spraying has been completed by VDOT. This site is located near one of DEQ's stream monitoring stations. She discussed this with VDOT personnel, who explained that chemicals used for spraying in areas like this next to a stream are safe for usage by waterways. Several participants requested the names of the herbicides used along road R/W. DEQ will provide participants with this information, and will check with DEQ biologists to see any significant impacts to the benthic community may have been captured during the time of herbicide application. Spraying outside of the road R/W (areas where plant growth may hinder views) has also been observed in the watersheds. One participant noted that their hazelnut trees, which are located outside of the R/W had been sprayed even when "don't spray signs" were posted. Nesha offered to follow-up with VDOT on this additional concern.

Pasture and Cropland Best Management Practices (BMPs)

The group moved on to review a series of pasture and cropland BMP scenarios that are expected to meet the goal of removing the streams from the impaired waters list. All of the scenarios included significant goals for improved pasture management in the watersheds. One of the participants noted that they had begun installation of a rotational grazing system for their operation, and that the greatest challenge/expense is getting water to the different paddocks. In some cases, the only water source is an on-site spring. The group discussed the idea of holding a field day at their farm once the grazing system was complete in order to demonstrate how they work. The group discussed waste storage facilities and whether there remains an unmet need for storage in the watersheds. Most of the farmers that need storage already have it; however, the group thought that there was probably still a need for 1 or 2 facilities. Someone asked if there is data on the average number of cows in a herd in Rockbridge County. The estimates in the BMP scenarios showed that one waste storage facility would be treating manure from an average of 100 cattle. It was noted that most of the farms in the watershed have pretty small herds, and that there are only a handful of larger farms. Nesha offered to check the 2013 Census of Agriculture and report back to the group on average herd sizes for the county. The group expressed some concerns about cattle exclusion from streams and how this might impact smaller farms in terms of land available for grazing. Sammy Vest with the Natural Bridge Soil and Water Conservation District explained that fencing doesn't have to be placed 35 feet from the stream in order to receive financial assistance through state and federal cost share programs. Fifty percent cost share is available for fencing placed 10 feet from the stream as well. Nesha stated that stream bank stabilization can be done in conjunction with fencing, but this can be costly. There are several grant programs available that can provide funding for streambank stabilization projects on a competitive basis.

Streamside Livestock Exclusion

The group discussed characteristics of some of the different options for livestock exclusion from streams that are available through state and federal cost share programs. The group felt that total exclusion with off stream watering was going to be a hard sell, but that some farmers might be interested in installing exclusion systems if limited access points to the stream could be provided for watering. Sammy Vest explained how these access points work, and it was agreed that they would be more suitable for smaller tributaries of the creeks. One participant asked about the types of activities that are allowed in streamside buffers established through government cost share programs. Specifically, he was interested in whether or not buffers could be flash grazed by cattle. This used to be allowed in cost share programs, but is now prohibited after a handful of participants commonly left their livestock in the buffers for extended periods of time. Due to the cost of exclusion systems and the extent of work associated with installation, it was suggested that some farmers may want to install fencing in phases, starting out with just a couple of fields and a limited access point. Once farmers are able to see how the new set up works for them, they may be willing to do more at a later date.

The group discussed challenges associated with installing streamside fencing on leased land. There is quite a bit of pasture that is leased in the watersheds, and many landowners are not interested in investing in fencing. It was mentioned that Headwaters Soil and Water

Conservation District currently has a grant to explore strategies to encourage BMP installation on leased land. They recently held a land leasing workshop and are also offering financial assistance for fencing with a shorter contract period of 5 years (compared to an average of 10 for typical state cost share programs). A program like this could be explored in the Buffalo and Colliers Creek watersheds as well. Cooperative Extension would be a good partner in this effort.

BMPs for Horse Farms

The group discussed the possibility of including BMPs for horse farms in the watershed. Sammy Vest noted that the regular cost share program that the Soil and Water Conservation District administers does not provide assistance to horse farms. Nesha said that horse farm BMPs had been included in the water quality improvement plan recently completed for Spout Run, which is located in Clarke County. This plan included measures to control barnyard runoff along with manure storage and composting. The state is currently funding implementation of these BMPs through a grant to the county. Some participants thought that BMPs for horse farms should be included in the plan since some of these operations allow their horses stream access. It was also noted that this might “open a can of worms” if the state begins providing cost share to horse farms (local residents might see this as a waste of money if BMPs are installed on properties with one or two horses). Nesha suggested limited BMPs to larger operations that are contributing to the water quality problems.

One participant asked whether karst topography would be considered in the plan. Nesha responded that there are some BMPs that are specifically designed to address karst that could be considered for inclusion in the plan. One participant said that it cost her ~\$12,000 to drill a 500-foot deep well on her property due to the presence of rock. This needs to be considered in development of cost estimates to provide off stream water to livestock.

Next Steps

The group discussed meeting at the Palmer Community Center again in a month or two at 7 pm. Nesha will send out a summary of the meeting, the additional information that was requested by participants, and a date for the next meeting. The next meeting will cover the remaining items on the agenda not covered in this meeting. The meeting adjourned at 8:30.