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Remarks for panel discussion submitted by Ricky Rash, VASWCD President,
Farmer and long time District Director

Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) Role in the Delivery of the Virginia AgBMP Cost Share Program

Forty-seven soil and water conservation districts (SWCD) serve as the primary NPS (non-point source) delivery system here in Virginia . We have been involved in numerous partnerships for many years and welcomed the opportunity to participate in another unique group, **The Partnership for Water Quality,** slightly more than a year ago. Our experience with various partners has served districts well and supports us in working with and assisting this group with real, on the ground, Best Management Practices (BMP).

I think districts serve four primary functions that are in keeping with Virginia 's tradition of addressing natural resource conservation through voluntary actions of land owners and managers, with many subsets within these four function areas. The four areas are: **Identify Educate, Advise, and Assist.** I will expand on these areas and the aforementioned partnerships throughout this document.

IDENTIFY

Every district serves to identify local soil and water conservation issues within the jurisdictions that they serve. Districts and their staff must identify those producers and landowners that will benefit the most using the 5 priority practices and/or the remaining suite of identified agricultural BMPs. Not every practice is suited for every farm nor will identical practices have the same effectiveness on different farms. Districts must seek producers that will fulfill their obligations and maintain practices for the length of stated contract. This does not mean that we hand pick producers, but we try to ensure that the product we are selling - voluntary, incentive based programs - are a good match for that individual or family. Living within our communities allows us, SWCD directors and staff, to better understand our potential clientele whether we have met them or not.

Bear in mind that our first role as districts is to SELL the need for NPS reductions. We accomplish this by offering voluntary, incentive based programs, hence the cost share program. DCR is best suited to give you the chronological history of the Ag BMP program and how long we have been serving the Commonwealth. We may sometimes mention that EPA and DEQ are waiting in the wings, when needed, to help sell the need for a voluntary, incentive based approach.

EDUCATE

The Ag BMP program originally was a teaching and demonstration program. It was geared to initially see some type of sunset, but for whatever reason, the incentive based portion has managed to stick around through thick and thin. Now, the Ag BMP program has developed into a water quality program over time. Some of the early plots and practices (such as no-till corn) have caught on and are still largely in effect today. Look at no-till corn planting for example, Virginia may rank among the highest percentage of states in the nation for no-till corn planting. Other crops are rivaling no-till corn as well. Science has had a great positive impact on the ability to implement no-till. It also is the basis for the practices within the BMP manual.

Farmers want to do a good job and be responsible environmental stewards, but you have heard the price tag attached to water quality mentioned over and over. **The Partnership for Water Quality** made a request last session for $100 million per year. The farmer contribution is estimated to approach 65% of this amount. Neither of these figures is an insignificant amount and granted, either of these amounts, will be difficult to obtain even in the best of economic times. Consider for a moment the duress, distress and cash flow nightmare that our Commonwealth's 44,000 farmers are facing. We, districts, through the Ag BMP cost share program, try to provide a solution to our constituents rather than they being forced to comply with burdensome regulations. One could deduct that the farmers share would be the sum of these two figures or $1.65 billion. So without incentives, farmers would need to seek cash to continue in business and the thought of regulation without incentives would force many to choose disbanding their operation, opting to sell the land for cash flow instead. This could severely undermine our agriculture and forestry industries that is now valued at $79 billion. Think: HOUSES.

ADVISE

Once a "green form" (cost share application form) has been signed, district work is only partially done. And while not discounting the need to market and sell NPS reduction, districts must then see the project to fruition. This means a project that meets all state and federal specifications as well as the expectations of the farmer. The education process is now ongoing and could be coined the proverbial "on the job training." By now, we should have some idea about their needs, concerns and desires. Next, we point them to resources that appropriately answer their questions if we cannot. For example, we assist them with conservation easements, provisions of the Agricultural Stewardship Act, nutrient management planning, identify other sources of funding and walk them through any project of their choosing that is consistent with our mission and expertise. It may start small with a cover crop growing into a larger acreage Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) practice or a wildlife plot. On a large scale project (whole farm) it is entirely possible to have at least nine state and federal agencies involved with the advisory phase (SWCD, DCR, DEQ, DOF, VDACS, VCE, NRCS, DGIF and FSA). All of this must achieve results that are consistent with our mission and authorities to conserve Virginia 's soil and water resources. This is the partnership that was previously alluded. Districts have effectively utilized this partnership for many years but with budgetary constraints at both state and federal level, it is becoming more and more thinly stretched due to limited personnel and support funds for travel.

This is also known as **Technical Assistance** . Districts and our partners now share our wealth of information for the common good of both the producers and water quality. All practices are based on the best science and technology available. Farm visits are now common and are needed to avoid confusion and misperceptions of what meets and exceeds specifications and expectations. Nuances and glitches are routinely reported at district board meetings. Conflicts and resolutions are also reported. But an important aspect of all this has yet been overlooked: District oversight. A district board must ensure through staff that all procedures have been followed and we, as directors, are comfortable with a particular project moving forward. We, district boards, act in an advisory capacity along the complex process of implementing even the simplest Ag BMP. The documentation and oversight of all practices are duly noted. The "green form" is a contract with its many specifications. It is always signed by a district director and the producer. These district directors are familiar to many of you on these two committees. I suspect that many directors in your respective districts contact your office frequently during the year. But at the risk of understating a little known fact, district directors are locally elected volunteers receiving no monetary compensation for their service. Many will fight to see it remains that way!

There are currently about 180 district employees statewide. Of those, some are dedicated to Ag BMP work or TMDL's which are very similar in nature. And with passage of SB 511, districts are entitled to 5% of the allocated cost share funds to support technical assistance. Whether 5% is correct or past allowances of up to 15% is more reflective of actual costs, the need for technical assistance increases as the cost share dollars graduate up. Staff must also graduate commensurate with funding. With the largest single year cost share program underway, it seems that a figure of approximately 8% may be needed to ensure adequate funding for **Technical Assistance** . Current estimates state that it takes two years to hire and train a district employee to level one job approval authority, I.e. be able to design basic practices.

ASSIST

The district role of assistance is broad. Not only do we help see the practice on the ground, we also see that it is maintained. Practice life can range from one to ten years. By now, we should have assisted by shepherding the initial phases and keeping track of the nuances that arise and making sure that suggested changes will still comply with requirements and specifications. With the implementation of Ag BMPs, farm visits increase, paper work is generated while we counsel the landowner that the completed project will be worth the investment. We, thus far have been part salesperson, marketer, expert, scientist, engineer, confidant, arbitrator and an occasional "friend" - all the time of being veiled in a complex, yet not totally regulated, NPS reduction initiative program. The district role may be considered by some farmers as the last stand before regulation. Utilizing the state or federal cost share programs may well make the difference in continuing a lifelong livelihood and continuing that multigenerational family farm rather than selling for more development. Veteran district staffs are adept in utilizing both state and federal program dollars for producers. The state and federal programs work in synch

trying to avoid duplicity so that once a general understanding is reached there can be a meld of both programs to the benefit of farmers but more especially, water quality.

We also see that practices are given ample credit from a reporting arena. Not only do we oversee the project we also must calculate payments, tax credits and generate reports to the satisfaction of DCR and NRCS who in turn, must report their findings to their respective administrations and legislative bodies. Districts provide a level of oversight both reporting and administrative assistance that should give some comfort to those appropriating the monies. Districts adhere to policies and procedures set forth by the Director of the Department of Conservation and Recreation in conjunction with the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board. Current policies recommend that funding be channeled into the highest priority areas of any watershed. One of the more recent accomplishments is the inclusion of the area outside the Chesapeake Bay watershed known as the Southern Rivers.

In conclusion, many in the conservation and agricultural arena do not understand the complexity of what it takes to get any BMP planned, installed and monitored. We try to plan the farm and farm the plan. Districts often do not understand the need for so much oversight and the minutia in reporting, detailing each step and most of all the Politics. But the two go hand in hand and subsequently complement each other very well. It is a system that we currently rely on to achieve water quality objectives.

Districts have been able to handle a graduated increase in Ag BMP funding over the last few years. We have also been able to keep some level of interest in programs when funding has waned. I think this shows that districts, both directors and staff, are committed to assisting the Commonwealth in its water quality initiatives and goals. We stand ready to take on more responsibility. But perhaps our biggest challenge is security of funding and ultimately job security for the employees in the field. We must have a marketable product reasonably priced to sell. Unfortunately that takes money. And while all of us agree that water quality is laudable, the price and need (to stay in business) will ultimately make the decision to invest in NPS reductions. Unfortunately, there is no money offered in the second year of this biennial budget so districts and the **Partnership for Water Quality** will be seeking funds to continue our forward progress.

I want to leave you with several points:

- The complexity to enlist, support and install working BMP's within the entire gambit of expectations-both agricultural and conservation.
- The need for reliable, dependable knowledgeable employees for field and farm visits. With estimates ranging as high as 90% of the agricultural acres needing at least some type of BMP installed on those acres, this is not a task that will easily be attained.
- The oversight used when over 330 directors ponder over requests for cost share dollars both approval of those funds and subsequent tax credits. I do not think there is a system in place quite this unique.

I will leave you with few questions for now:

- Can any governing body, state or federal, afford not to assist producers install NPS reduction measures when the alternative that many aging farmers will choose is to stop producing and convert the land into another use?
- Can we afford to allow even the shortest time lapses in funding that ultimately require layoffs and retraining?

I think the answer to these questions is an emphatic **NO** . Even in these tough economic times farmers cannot afford to abandon sound agricultural practices such as soil testing and nutrient management that ultimately add to their bottom line. And a point that I have not made is this: **Agricultural Best Management practices are methods that take a good farm and make it better.** Farmers are proud people and proud of their work and most do not believe that their farm is causing harm downstream. Most will tell you that they cannot control Mother Nature's handy work. Science tells us that we **can** have a positive impact and that this is the Delta between funding, districts and our genuine stewards, our farmers.

And last, are any of us prepared to envision the future without a voluntary incentive based program versus a regulatory approach? I would hope that we all agree that the price tag to enlist better agricultural management practices is far less than the cost of losing our productive farm and forest land that make up our Commonwealth's largest industry.