Virginia Soil Health Coalition Quarterly Meeting
Meeting Minutes
7/26/21

I. Welcome
   ○ Dr. Ed Jones, Director, VCE
      ■ Thanks to the Coalition for coming together because of the existential issue in VA and collaborating to find a solution.
      ■ VCE supports this work and will do what they can to help. Cannot emphasize enough how important it is.
   ○ Menti question: What or who comes to mind when you hear the words soil health?
      ■ Essential, conservation, productivity, farmers, organic matter, chris lawrence, alive, biology, active, no till, regeneration, living soil, water retention, holistic, network of microbes, public health, etc.

II. Panel: Farmer Perspectives on Soil Health
   ○ Panelists: Anne Geyer, Daniel Austin, Doug Fifer, Jacob Gilley
   ○ Facilitator: Becky Szarnsyksi
   ○ Q: Farming operation background and specific farming background
      ■ JG: Raising 3 kids on their family farm. He is 1st generation, and his wife is 4th. 30 cow-calf operation. 200 stocker calves a year. 45 hair sheep ewes, also broilers. Works with American Farmland Trust.
      ■ DF: Family history of farming. 450 acres of crop, mostly corn and soybean, 50,000 turkey hens a year to Cargill. Installing buffer strips and other BMPs to help waterways. Excited to get back to regenerative ag.
      ■ DA: Farm in Rocky Mount, VA. 5th generation producer. His family are dairymen, has a few livestock but mostly for hobby. 450 acres of crop, mostly grain and directly marketed.
      ■ AG: Agriberry Farm in Hanover. 12 acres that they own in berries. 15 acres they rent in other crops. They share-hold 15 more acres in Chesterfield growing strawberries. Did not grow up on a farm, learned about crops through Cornell and UMD. Farmed in the Northern Neck in the 80s and started their own business in the 2000’s.
   ○ Q: How did you all get interested in SH and why is it important on your operation?
      ■ AG: very important in fruit and orchard crops- perennial plants help to stabilize the soil. Soil is contained with a very precise irrigation method. Flora and fauna are enhanced by improvement of soil health. Because berry crops especially need excellent soil with excellent drainage and organic matter. Want to keep inspiring and empowering fruit and berry growth.
      ■ DA: Want to increase yields with soil health, but they are really trying to repopulate the countryside and to have farms that are successful. One of
the reasons we feel it is important is because there is no more land being made, so they have to be good stewards

■ DF: Always interested in being a good steward. Agreed with the rock picking. All need to take care of the waters, loves to fish the Bay. Wanted to do his part, dug into what he can do to help the next generation. Wants to learn how nature can help and how it works. Win-win with labor and reduction of chemicals and input costs.

■ JG: Soil health is foundation of the operation. They are not making any more land. Wants to leave the land as a legacy. It does come down to economics- makes the operation more resilient and handles the extreme fluctuations in nature. Much easier to access equipment. Fills in the gaps using native grasses. Uses multi species grazing, intensive rotational grazing, cross-seeding, reducing hay they are making.

○ Q: What are the soil health practices on your operation? How do you focus on the 4 pillars of SH?

■ DA: Do some things right and some things wrong. Backbone of their crop rotation is the direct to consumer. Grow a lot of small grains. Seeding small grains after soybean harvest. After the small grain is cut, bale all the straw (probably shouldn’t be doing but can’t ignore the cash flow). Spread poultry manure to increase biodiversity. Corn is planted, and comes off late. Then grow cereal rye, rolls cereal rye and starts soybean again. Tries to keep the soil covered as much as possible, living root as much as possible, diversity of the plant, no till. This rotation helps break up the soybean corn disease. Is trying to break into livestock grazing but that is still more of a hobby.

■ DF: Attended a no till conference in ‘14, that got him thinking about rolling. Purchased one two years ago. Developed a vetch that would develop two weeks earlier. Went from 15 acres to 150 acres in one year with rolling. Put in wheat and vetch and gets rolled to corn. Following spring he is drilling in barely that will be combined, puts soybean in behind to get the legume. Then goes to wheat and soybean. 3 years, a 5 to 6 crop rotation. Only tilling he is doing is a vertical till to break up the soil so the corn stands better and has better biomass. After 5 years, there is a huge difference in the soil. The large amount of crops helps with pests and diseases. Got away from insecticide. Installing a pollinator spot to help draw-in more pollinators.

■ AG: Covered soils part is most important. Don’t always use plastic material for raised beds, they use the landscaping fiber. Minimal disturbance. Maximizing the root of the plant. When they do rotate out a planting, they do put in cover crops to minimize the bad nematodes. Do a lot of soil testing. Hard to find metrics for flora and fauna.

■ JG: Keeping the ground covered is essential, renting more land then they may need helps. Balance between delayed mowing for fauna and
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keeping the ground covered. Allows for less chance of overgrazing. Minimizing disturbance helps not destroy the land and helps strip graze and spread the manure over a bigger spread. Has the native grasses for a higher diversity. Trying to adopt the grazing cover crops. Sees a lot of promise in these practices.

○ Q: How has the transition been to moving to BMPs? Has there been any challenges to this?
  ■ AG: Takes a long time to know and see the results. Knowing that they are doing the right thing is helping a lot. Looking for and welcoming more input from the science community.
  ■ DA: Has done a lot of wrong things when trying to transition to better soil health practices. Trick to it is being aware that you don’t know everything and you don’t have to reinvent the wheel. A mentoring group and outsiders from the region would be helpful. Having an open mind and being willing to learn and experiment is crucial.
  ■ JG: Blessed that his father-in-law was open to adopting these new practices. Gaining insight and knowledge, organizations, webinars, youtube videos, and books has been extremely helpful when learning about these practices. Support or accountability group would be helpful. Take it one piece at a time.
  ■ DF: Transition went really smooth. Getting dad to understand change was the hardest part of the transition. Having the open mind is the most important part. Saw other peoples mistakes and learned from them. Does a lot of his own research in the winter. Started out small then went bigger.

○ Q: Are there any opportunities or challenges that you can see for mentoring?
  ■ DA: What he sees in his area, farming is a tight-knit community and farmers like to think of themselves as rugged individuals. There’s early adopters who do it for financial reasons, to do it no matter what, there are the middle people, and then the last people who don’t want to do it. The early adopters are the most important. Another change that needs to happen is wheat needs to be subsidized.
  ■ JG: Promise in working with the younger generation. Building the foundation earlier and providing the support necessary for farm and responsibility transition. Helping producers work through the transitional challenges. Mentoring and support groups are important and should be brought back to VA.
  ■ DF: Biggest thing is that most farmers is that the older farmer is more reluctant, but the younger generation wants to try. To have more successful farmers help and mentor is really important.

III. Coalition updates:
Steering Committee: Eric Bendfeldt, Kristen Hughes Evans, Mike Kane, Rory Maguire, Robert Shoemaker, Becky Szarzynski, Wade Thomason, Kendall Tyree, Brent Wills, Chris Lawrence (Advisor)

Tracking and evaluating the Coalition (Rory Maguire)

- NFWF grant: 3 pillars - wanted to significantly increase coalition and collaboration between the partners. Hired Mary as Coordinator.
  - Pillar one: Collaboration building. Formalized the structure for this group. Helped put together a draft strategy plan for the group. Looking to grow the Coalition.
  - Pillar two: Implementation. Doing this through paid peer-to-peer mentoring. Doing this through multiple different organizations. 5 paid mentors that are the early mentors, 5 mentees per farmer. 25 farmers total for organization. Trying to get more technical and financial assistance.
  - Pillar three/leveraging market opportunities: bumping to Eric Bendfeldt.

4 The Soil Awareness Initiative (Eric Bendfeldt)

- Looking for ways to leverage the market opportunities to soil health. Raising general awareness of the importance of soil. A lot that can be done to educate the farming and broader community and help to bring this to the marketplace and consumer.
- 4 the Soil is the idea of being for something. Promotes an idea that we can be for something. The core principles have been promoted for many years, so this is a way to refresh and simplify these principles. Able to share and ambassador tool kit to help market and create messages for the soil. Encouraging both individuals and organizations to support.

Next steps:
- 4TS podcasts, two per month
- Fall 4 the Soil educational events and activities
- Contests, videos, vignettes, and profiles to personalize
- Explore advertisement placement
- Takeaway cards, buttons
- 2-Page extension publications
- Discussion of consumer-facing pilot efforts
- Discussion with VA Tourism
- On-going collaboration and outreach

Integration of Soil Health into DCR Cost Share Program (Robert Shoemaker/Amy Walker)

- Looking at integrating soil health into the DCR cost-share program → VACS has been based on water quality improvement in the past.
- Started by developing a soil health matrix to look at current cost share practices and to look at which ones would do the most to improve soil health
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- Met July 12th with group of partners and producers to see what they and soil health coalition members would like to see in a potential soil health bundle. More meetings planned. Hoping to advance this process in fall/winter.

IV. Break-out Groups
   ○ Marketing and Economics (facilitated by Eric Bendfeldt)
   ○ Technical Assistance & Training (facilitated by Kendall Tyree, Chris Lawrence, and Brent Wills)
   ○ Measurement & Evaluation (facilitated by Rory Maguire)

V. Round Robin: Summary of Breakouts
   (See notes from breakouts)

VI. Next Steps/Opportunities
   ○ Visit the website and sign up for the newsletter at virginiasoilhealth.org
   ○ Share your logo in support of the Coalition’s mission, vision, and principles
   ○ Quarterly meeting in October (more info to come)
   ○ Take the pledge! 4thesoil.org
   ○ Opportunities:
     ■ July 28: Regenerative Agriculture & Soil Microbial Carbon Pump
     ■ July 19: Annual Research and Extension Field Day- Southern Piedmont AREC
     ■ July 30: VSU College of Ag Field Day
     ■ Aug 5: VA Ag Expo
     ■ Aug 17: The Benefits of Cover Crops for Soil Health- an NRCS Perspective

VII. Adjourn