

Support for Budding “Grass-Farmers”

Cost-saving Opportunities through Services

In an area with rapidly changing land use, small-acreage horse operations are destined to become the next generation of agricultural land users. Historically, farmers have been outstanding stewards of the land, knowing that conserving soil and water resources on their land ensures years of productivity. Caring for your land in a way that reduces soil erosion and pollution from animal manure and excess fertilizers also helps to limit the need for strong regulatory action by county or state government officials.

As a non-regulatory agency, PWSWCD is here to guide your land management so that your operation remains in compliance with regional regulations, most often the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act. Irresponsible land management can lead to complaints from neighbors or other concerned citizens. Following a Soil & Water Quality Conservation Plan developed through the District can help protect you from wrongful accusations. Developing a plan with short- and long-term goals will get you on your way to becoming a successful “grass farmer.”

Through the planning process we may help you identify some conservation-oriented improvements that you would like to incorporate into your operation. Popular conservation practices include rotational grazing enhancements such as interior fencing and water troughs, development of bluestone dust surfaced paddocks that allow for turnout during pasture rest periods, manure storage and composting facilities, and streamside fencing for the benefit of water quality and horse health and safety.

Using the expertise of our knowledgeable conservation specialists can save you money. A great, and very common example, is the layout of a grazing system with one source of water and shelter centrally located in a bluestone paddock. One water trough can serve multiple fields saving you substantial installation and maintenance costs—you may even save enough to afford an automatic, freeze proof trough instead of just a hydrant. Our staff has experience with improving existing layouts as well as developing systems from “scratch.”

Soil testing, a free service provided by our staff, provides you with pasture-specific recommendations for the application of any needed lime or fertilizer to maximize your pasture production. If the soil tests show that amendments are needed, our staff can teach you how to select bagged fertilizer and lime products to meet your needs. After you understand how to read labels on fertilizer you can select a product(s) that are the most cost-effective for your needs.

Our federal partner agency the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides additional money saving assistance for farmers. An engineering technician is available to provide advice and offer solutions to problems on your farm. Common questions involve drainage, runoff patterns, and erosion. Appointments are scheduled through our office typically once every 3-4 weeks. Our conservation specialists accompany the engineering technician on the visit to your property and can help with any follow-up that is needed.

Financial Incentives

Financial incentives are also a great way to reduce costs on more expensive improvements. Our agency administers financial incentives available from the state through the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practice Cost-Share and Tax Credit Program. Practices on all types of horse farms/properties that help improve surface and ground water quality qualify for state tax credits. Tax credits are used to directly reduce your tax liability and credits not utilized in one year may be carried forward for up to five years. If your farming operation produces an agricultural

product for market additional incentives called “cost-sharing” are available to use with the tax credits. When using cost-share incentives the state pays a percentage of the eligible costs and you pay a percentage. The current incentive rates provided by the state are 25% for tax credits and 75% for cost-share.

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service administers federal financial incentive programs. Some of the programs help with the installation of practices similar to our state programs like fencing and animal waste systems. Additionally their programs can help with wildlife habitat installation and wetlands protection. Some programs are offered consistently while others are short-term special programs like one that is currently targeting regional projects that help with air quality. Incentive levels vary by program.

Grants are another tool we use to help fund projects. Grants come from a variety of sources in large and small amounts. Currently we are working on the Chesapeake Bay-Friendly Horse Farm Project to create a model farm for education purposes. This large project is 50% funded by the state and 50% through other public and private partnerships. Use of innovation and/or offering community education related to improvements is often necessary to secure grant funds.

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality has been offering a low interest loan program to help farmers make conservation improvements to their land since 1999. Most recently they added the first-time purchase of no-till seeders to their list of eligible practices. The loan rate is consistently 3% interest. The loan program can be combined with other incentives.

If you would like to make improvements to your farm, let us work with you to identify state, federal or private financial incentives that can help. Contact our office at (703) 594-3621 or pwsxcd@pwsxcd.org for more information.

Are you already well on your way to creating green pastures and cleaner waters? If so, we'd like to recognize your efforts! The District has handsome (& free!) metal signs that indicate your commitment to protecting community waters in your role as a District “Cooperator.” We think they're a “must-have” for the environmentally conscious horse-keeper. Hang it on your farm with pride. Call the District if you've cooperated in the past, if you've been doing the right thing all along, or if you're ready to start earning your sign. We'd like to see them everywhere!