

Agricultural Program

The 2017 Virginia Agricultural Cost Share (VACS) Program set the high water mark for the Colonial SWCD in terms of funding. A record of nearly \$636,000 was allocated to the district to be used for the installation and implementation of agricultural Best Management Practices (BMPs). District Conservation Specialist Tom Dunlap did an excellent job administering his first cost share program by getting over 85% of the funds distributed for practices including cover crops, continuous no-till, and the variable rate applications of nitrogen and phosphorus through the precision nutrient management practice.

Each year, soil and water districts across the state receive grant funding, through the Dept. of Conservation and Recreation, to administer the VACS program. Many BMPs in the VACS program are prioritized by the Dept. of Conservation and Recreation for their environmental benefits to our public waterways. Each District combines state’s priority criteria, and knowledge of the local needs and environmental concerns, to target BMPs to address local water quality concerns.

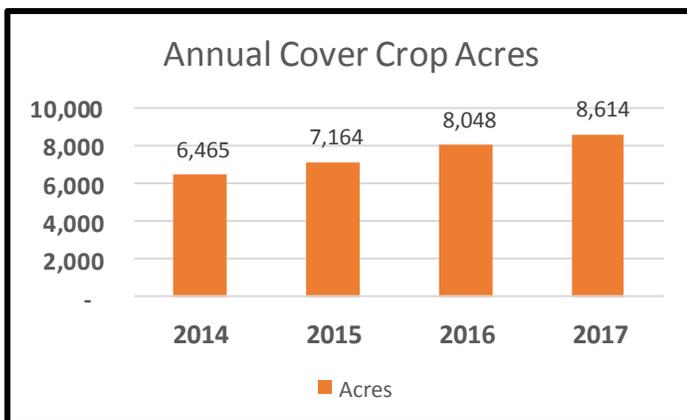
The program is open to all engaged in the management or production of a bona fide agricultural, horticultural, or forest product on a minimum of five contiguous acres, which generates verifiable gross receipts in excess of \$1,000 from the sale of the products annually for each of the last five years. The program begins on July 1 of each year. To find out more about the program, please contact Tom Dunlap.



A mixed species cover crop of radish and cereal rye in early December



No-till corn planted into standing vetch cover crop



The Colonial SWCD continued to have great success in promoting the cover crop BMPs in the past year, spending nearly \$350,000 on winter covers of cereal grains, legumes, brassicas, or mixtures of such species. Cover Crops are traditionally plant species cultivated with no intention of harvesting, but provide an environmentally beneficial role, such as providing ground cover, cycling nutrients, suppressing noxious weed species, and improving soil health.

Agricultural Program

Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act

Each jurisdiction east of I-95 is required to have a Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act (CBPA) ordinance and program. Local programs are overseen by the state’s Department of Environmental Quality. Local laws govern development in sensitive areas and along perennial waterways throughout each county. For many years districts serving CBPA localities assisted those jurisdictions with administering the agricultural provision of the Bay Act. Today, the Colonial SWCD still provides that service to its localities, usually in the form of riparian buffer area assessments on ag lands, but occasionally by developing a conservation plan to guide agricultural land clearing activities.

This year in Charles City, the Colonial SWCD carried out Resource Protection Area buffer assessments on farmland in close proximity to our public waterways. The 20 randomly selected assessments carried out by District staff represent approximately 2,670 acres in the County. During these assessments, each farm field within the randomly selected parcel was examined on foot. The effectiveness of the BMPs currently being implemented, and the adequacy of the buffer separating agriculturally managed fields from creeks, streams, and rivers was evaluated. Our staff was happy to report that the majority of the fields surveyed were in compliance with no further action needed by the land owner, or the producer.



Staff Photo

Resource Management Plans

The Colonial SWCD completed the certification process for Virginia’s Resource Management Plan (RMP) Program on 5 farms (this year 746 acres). The program provides a voluntary way to promote the use of conservation



practices that improve farming operations and water quality. Resource management plans can help farm owners and operators take advantage of all the conservation measures at their disposal. The plans are designed to encourage either the farm owner or operator, to use a high level of best management practices (BMPs) that reduce runoff pollution to local waters and, in many cases, improve the farmer’s financial bottom line.

In return for full implementation, the plan holder can be assured that he or she is in compliance with any new state nutrient, sediment and water quality standards, specifically, regulations related to the Chesapeake Bay and all local stream segment TMDLs. The certificate of safe harbor is valid for nine years provided the farmer continues to implement the RMP. Participation in the program is completely voluntary.

The Virginia General Assembly passed a bill in 2011, which allowed for the creation of the RMP program. Virginia’s soil and water conservation districts have been involved in inspecting and approving RMPs since 2014.

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Education Program

Jamestown High School Envirothon Team Claims 2nd Place Finish at State Competition



Pictured above L to R: Drexel Harris, Dominion Energy representative; Jamestown Envirothon members Elizabeth Horley, Yubin Kang, Anna Song, Audrey Root, Elsa Barrientos, Joanna Stathopoulos, and Rachel Smith

The Jamestown High School Envirothon team narrowly missed capturing the state title, finishing behind Fort Defiance High School (Augusta County) at Virginia’s Dominion Envirothon environmental challenge held at Virginia State University on May 21-22, 2017.

The Envirothon competition is a hands-on, outdoor competition designed to challenge and test students’ knowledge of soils and land use, aquatic ecology, forestry, wildlife and current environmental issues. The program is field-oriented, community-based, and gives students an opportunity to work with natural resource professionals.

Virginia’s Envirothon, sponsored by Dominion Energy, is administered through individual Soil and Water Conservation Districts in conjunction with the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (VASWCD). The Colonial SWCD proudly supports the Envirothon and the Jamestown High School team with educational and financial resources.

To learn more about Envirothon or to develop a team, please contact the Colonial SWCD office.

Colonial SWCD Sends 4 Campers to Youth Conservation Camp



The Colonial SWCD offered 4 scholarships to area high school students to attend Youth Conservation Camp this year. Pictured left to right are: Rachel Smith (Jamestown), Audrey Root (Jamestown), Dylan Rooks (New Kent), and Calvin Reeves (New Kent).

For 40 years, the VASWCD has sponsored the week long camp for Virginia high school students on the campus of Virginia Tech. The program brings together about 70 students for a week of learning about Virginia’s natural resources from conservation professionals and Virginia Tech faculty. Most instruction is hands-on and outdoors.

Education Program

The Blooming Partnership Between Colonial SWCD and the Williamsburg Community Growers

Early in the fiscal year the Colonial SWCD Board of Directors ratified a plan to partner with the Williamsburg Community Growers (WCG), a charitable non-profit organization established to educate the public about the benefits of producing and consuming locally grown produce, provide gardening space for those who are unable to purchase fresh produce, promote healthy, sustainable lifestyles, and demonstrate conservation practices that help build healthy soil and improve water quality.

Using district resources to leverage grant opportunities, the partnership has secured funding from Dominion Energy, the USDA/NRCS, the Williamsburg Health Foundation, and most recently the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) who funded the creation of a district staff position to coordinate and carry out the education efforts at the WCG site and other community gardens in the district.

The proposed curriculum will target three primary tracks. One track will focus on vegetable production and marketing to include growing fresh produce to be used in conjunction with the Summer Backpack program, which provides food to those in need. A conservation education track will focus on building soil health, re-using stormwater for irrigation, nutrient cycling, and yard waste composting. The third track targeted toward science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) will support the first two tracks. The objective is to use the garden site as an outdoor classroom to teach students of all ages.



Cover crops such as crimson clover (pictured above) provide multiple benefits to the garden. A legume species, the clover “fixes” nitrogen from the atmosphere, provides ground cover to reduce erosion potential, and encourages pollinator species such as bumble bees (below).



Above: Wetlands on the site will give students a first hand look at the flora, fauna, and function of the land form.



Above: Pam Frazier with fresh veggies awaiting pick up.

Urban Program

Virginia Conservation Assistance Program (VCAP) Offers Funds for Non-Ag BMPs

Much like the Virginia Agricultural Cost Share program (VACS) the Colonial SWCD administers, which targets farmers, the VCAP program offers financial assistance to non-agricultural landowners for the installation or implementation of Best Management Practices (BMPs) designed to improve water quality. The overall program goal is to encourage homeowners, homeowner associations, businesses, municipalities, churches, etc., to install stormwater retrofits that will provide nutrient and/or sediment reductions that can be credited toward accomplishing Virginia's Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) goals.



Photo credit : VCAP Manual



Photo credit : VCAP Manual

Clockwise from top left: VCAP rain garden, conservation planting, living shoreline and pervious pavement practices.



Photo credit : VCAP Manual



Photo credit : K. Duhring, CCRM-VIMS

Since the district has been administering the program, inquiries have been rolling in at about 1 per month. While the pace is not blistering, district directors and staff hope that interest will pick up as the fall planting season approaches and word of the program spreads. To date, three applications have been approved by the state VCAP Steering Committee. Fords Colony received approval for a rain garden application, as well as a conservation landscaping practice. Stonehouse Elementary School was awarded funds to install a rainwater harvesting system, which will divert rainwater from the school's gutters into a 500 gallon holding tank which will feed the school's garden. For a complete list of practices and specific program information, please visit <http://vaswcd.org/vcap>.

Urban Program

Wildflowers



Staff Photo

District staff, once again, planted wildflowers at several locations in James City and York Counties. Although the seedlings struggled due to the lack of rain during October and November, the color blossomed in the spring and summer. Wildflowers are a good alternative to managed turf, as the water and nutrient needs of the flowers are less than turf and the flowers are aesthetically pleasing. Shown below is a wildflower mixture which includes Black Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*).



Staff Photo

Horses

In August 2016, the Colonial SWCD Board of Directors updated the district's 4-year strategic plan. In the plan, directors committed to expanding the district's urban and suburban programming. One of the methods to achieve their stated goal was to engage the local equine community and find ways to provide conservation assistance to them.

Per the most recent agricultural census, conducted in 2012 by the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), there were 143 horse farms, housing 1,197 horses, within the district.



Photo Credit: Horsesforcleanwater.com

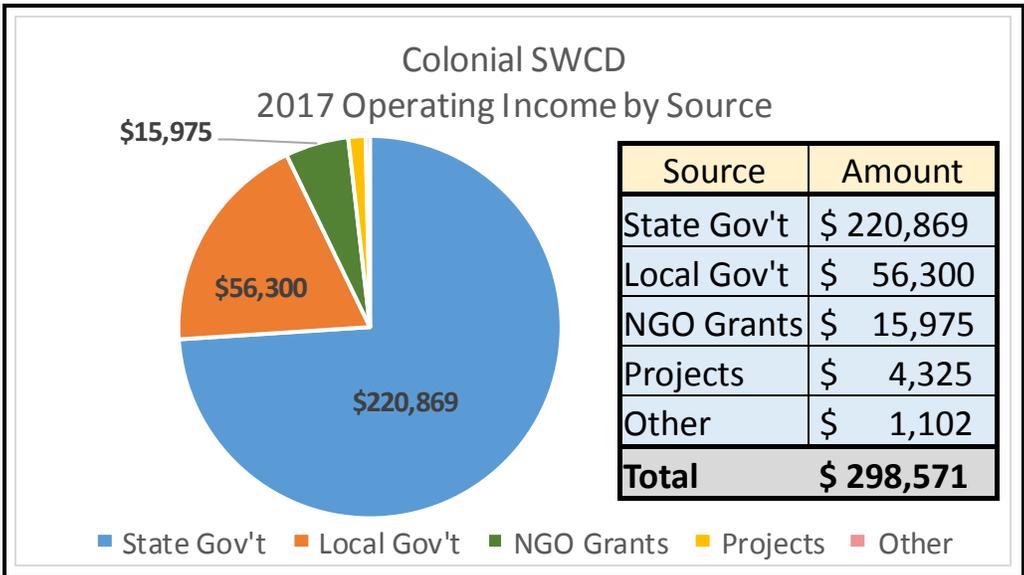
District directors and staff are pursuing the development of a conservation assistance program tailored to the equine community which would offer technical recommendations for pasture management, manure management and composting, dry lot design, and buffer area enhancement in addition to financial assistance to implement relevant Best Management Practices (BMPs).

Traditionally, equine operations and horse owners have not been eligible to participate in the Virginia Agricultural Cost Share (VACS) program due to minimum acreage and gross income requirements. The program currently under development would use grant funding to finance BMP installation, thereby opening the program to more participants.

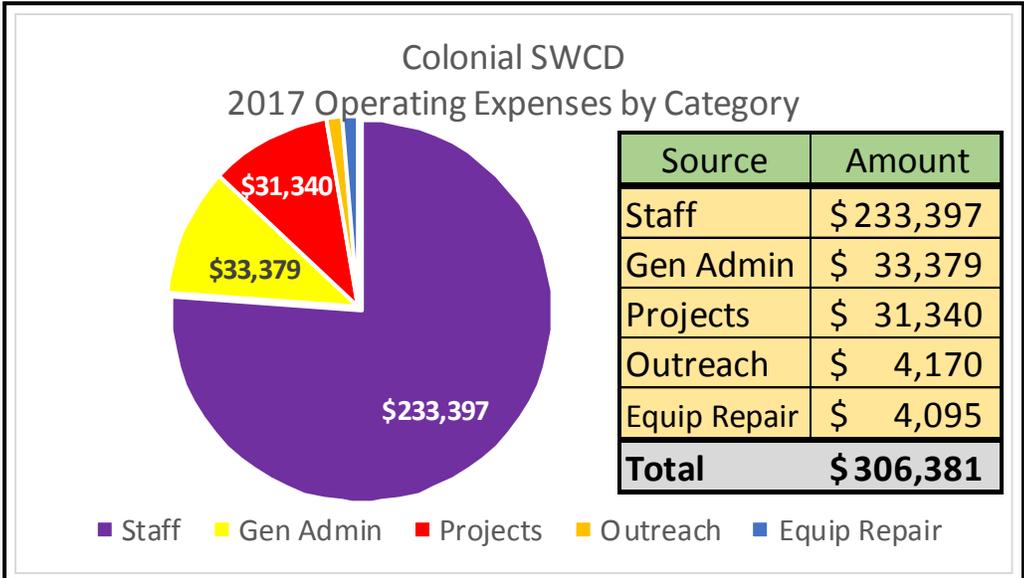
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Operations

Right: The Colonial SWCD typically receives about 75% of its funding from the Commonwealth of VA in the form of annual operating grants. Local government funding supplements state dollars, which allow the district to assist its localities with local programming. The district also receives funds from grant projects and donations.



Right: In FY 2017, the district spent the majority of its resources on staff salaries and training. Other significant expenses included rent, dues, and other administrative items, and financial support of the Williamsburg Community Growers project and their efforts to establish a community garden near Warhill HS.



Colonial SWCD Updates 4 Year Strategic Plan

Directors and staff, with assistance from the Department of Conservation and Recreation, updated its 4-year strategic plan early in the fiscal year.

The final plan identified 6 goals: continue to successfully implement current programming, increase educational and outreach programming, elevate the Board, staff, and facilities to meet future needs, demonstrate the integration of innovative technologies into conservation practices, develop additional funding streams, and expand urban/suburban conservation programming.

Since ratifying the plan in October 2016, the district's committees have reviewed the document quarterly and reported progress to the Board of Directors. Planning Committee Chair Bob Jeremiah says, "Keeping the plan current and in front of folks is what keeps it alive", referring to the quarterly reviews.

The district welcomes input from all our constituents in developing our annual plans of work and/or our strategic plan, which steers our mission across the district for staff and our Board of Directors.