

## **Virginia Grain Producers Are Committed to the Health and Stability of Virginia's Environment**

The members of the Virginia Grain Producers Association (VGPA) are diligent stewards of the land. Committed to environmental standards and practices, over 85 percent of VGPA producer members currently implement conservation practices. In times when many chose to point fingers, Virginia's farmers are busy making their operations as efficient as possible to protect their long-term viability.

Virginia's grain production accounts for approximately 800,000 acres each year. This gives grain farmers an extraordinary opportunity to help make a difference in Virginia's rivers and streams as well as the Chesapeake Bay. Using new technologies and practices, Virginia's grain farmers implement conservation practices such as continuous "no-till," winter cover crops, stream buffers and nutrient management plans. For example, a "stream buffer" provides grasses along streams that run through farm fields that trap and filter runoff and provide habitat for wildlife and shade for fish. Crops planted after the harvest of that year's regular crop, referred to as "cover crops," can help soak up and store excess nitrogen and phosphorus left in the soil. Over 400,000 grain acres in Virginia are in continuous "no-till," in which the farmer does not plow at any time but plants directly into the undisturbed soil.

Many farmers in Virginia are already using these tools to help protect Virginia's rivers and streams. Use of these tools has led to major reductions in soil loss, and, thus, reductions in pollution. Virginia farmers use science-based tools like soil samples, (PSNT -pre side-dress nitrogen testing), stalk sampling, Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and variable rate application methods, all to make their use of nutrients as efficient as possible. This enables them to grow ample and safe food, feed and fuel for America's economy. One of the biggest challenges facing Virginia farmers is the price tag to implement some of these conservation practices which while they may be a great investment for clean water, can be expensive. The average Virginia grain farm is less than 2,000 acres and most are family owned. Many Virginia farmers operate with only a small, and in some cases, no profit margin at all.

With volatile commodity markets, trade problems, unpredictable weather and sky-rocketing production costs, Virginia's producers continually seek ways to decrease costs and improve production efficiency. Over the past two years, Virginia's grain producers have experienced cost increases from 25 to 200 percent in areas like seed, equipment, land, labor, fuel and fertilizers. No farmers can afford to be wasteful or even liberal when applying nutrients to his/her farm. For this reason, VGPA producer members put part of their own profit (percentage of each bushel of grain sold in Virginia) into research and marketing for more efficient production methods.

Working farms are essential to the region's water quality goals because pollution run-off from suburban homes or shopping centers is nearly impossible to reduce in great numbers. However, Virginia's population has more than tripled over the past three years bringing more pollution to our area waters. In order to continue their on-farm conservation efforts, farmers must be profitable in

order to keep their lands in production. As proven by the state's population and development, farm land is in high demand and not just for environmental goals.

#### Conservation Facts on Production Agriculture:

- Nearly 60 percent of Virginia's grain acres are in continuous conservation tillage
- Over 90% of Virginia farmers implement conservation practices at their own expense outside government-funded programs.
- Virginia's corn farmers have increased their yields by over 100 bushels per acre since 1930 using less fertilizer, less pesticides and less land.
- Conservation tillage and other management practices reduced soil erosion 43 percent in the last 20 years.
- Corn farmers across the country produced 70 percent more corn per pound of fertilizer today than they did 35 years ago.
- These same US corn farmers grow five times more corn that they did in the 1930s on 20 percent less land.
- Over 90% of Virginia farms are owned by individuals or families.
- American corn farmers produced the five largest corn crops in history during the past five years. Even after supplying all demands for corn – food, feed, export and fuel, America will have 10 percent of the 2008 corn harvest leftover as a surplus resource.

According to Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE), there were 75,630 Virginia grain acres in continuous conservation tillage or “no-till” in 2003. However, out of these 75,600 acres only 5,630 acres were enrolled in incentive-based government programs. In Virginia, a conservation practice only receives “credit” in the Chesapeake Bay Model (used for statistics and restoration measurements) if the producers is paid for implementing the practice through a government program. Therefore, there were approximately 70,000 acres of continuous no-till unaccounted for in government figures. Many farmers chose not to enter such a program because of cumbersome, required paperwork or in many cases, they were denied from participation because of lack of funding. For example, one VGPA producer member farms a historic plantation on the James River. This producer tried to enroll the land into a continuous no-till program but was denied because of lack of funding. The Plantation is today in continuous no-till but as far as the Chesapeake Bay Model reports, that farm offers no reduction to soil erosion into the James River.

The science of the Bay Model is a serious impediment to Bay restoration efforts. It offers incomplete and inaccurate data based on guesses and estimations, not real-time scientific data. This is frustrating not only for Virginia's producers but also for the area legislators and agencies in charge of implementing conservation efforts and programs. Many count on the Chesapeake Bay Model science to be sound which as many have come to realize, is not what this model offers. In part to help correct some of these inherent problems, VGPA has partnered with several different groups in hopes to improve farmer profitability and water quality goals.

VGPA has partnered with Chesapeake Bay Foundation and Chesapeake Bay Commission in an effort to share information, help make better policies and work together to bring more funding for conservation practices in our area. VGPA values these partners. One partnership of note is also VGPA's work with Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) in launching the Virginia Bay On Farm Network. This is a voluntary, pro-active “participatory learning” program for farmers designed to

help them collect scientific data on their individual operations. The goal of the project is to increase farmer profitability by decreasing input costs through increased efficiency of Nitrogen. The success of this project is simple: marrying farmer profitability with environmental goals. The On Farm Network project is supported through self-imposed farmer fees and private grant funds. This is just one example of how Virginia's farmers are pro-actively seeking ways to partner their farms and the environment for common goals.

While efforts and partnerships are crucial, more research is badly needed. Virginia's farmers, along with many others, want to know what practices will most benefit their operation and the environment together. Is it winter cover crops and if so, what type? What are the optimal planting dates and what management practices are best for helping a cover crop achieve maximum environmental benefits. These are just a few of the serious questions that Virginia Tech researchers are trying to answer. However, funding is once again, a crucial issue.

Despite the various challenges facing Virginia's farms and our environment, VGPA believes the two have an important role to play together. Virginia's farmers have made significant environmental progress to the benefit of the entire region. VGPA applauds the many efforts of its farmers and farms thus far. As there is much more to be accomplished, we need to support further research, advanced technologies, conservation funding and more education. Our region's producers provide food, feed, and fuel while serving on the frontlines of achieving environmental goals. Each of us can help in achieving environmental goals by supporting Virginia's farms.

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