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The South River Current



Promoting interest and collaboration for watershed stewardship



Watershed Restoration: What is CREP?

Taking care of a farm is a daunting task, but some people are just made for it. In the latest installment of the *South River Currents* video series, we hear from a local farmer, born and bred for the job—Mac Swortzel. Mac's family runs Suffangus Farm, a 400-acre homestead that borders the South River. The Suffangus Farm participates in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). In exchange for removing environmentally sensitive land (think streams and streambeds) from all farm production and growing specific plant species there instead, the farm is paid an annual rental rate. It took Mac's farmworkers a total of about three years to fence off the land along a creek on his property and then plant the specified trees in the stream buffer area. The banks of the creek remain untouched, and the buffer serves to filter damaging

nutrients from grazing cattle and fertilizers. Listen to Mac tell his story in this [short video](#). Scroll down to Connections to hear how more farmers can participate in these conservation practices.

Did You Know?



- State cost-share programs are updated every year. If you were unable to find a solution in the past, contact [Headwater Soil and Water Conservation District](#) [(540) 248-0148] or swing by their office (70 Dick Huff Lane, Verona, VA 24482) to learn what is new for 2022. (*photo credit*)
 - Chicory and Queen Anne's lace grow wild throughout Augusta County now but originally traveled to the area on the backs of European settlers' livestock and tangled with hay feed and bedding.
 - The 2017 Census of Agriculture tallied 3,691 farms in Augusta and Rockingham counties. Those farms include 290,911 acres in Augusta County and 228,542 in Rockingham County. Together that's about half the size of Rhode Island in farmland!
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Augusta County farm employing conservation practices. Photo by Bobby Whitescarver

Connections: Funding for the Farm

Do you or does someone you know farm in Augusta County? Local conservation groups have more funding than ever before to help finance farm practices that benefit soil health, water quality, and a farmer's bottom line. The Headwaters Soil and Water Conservation District and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service have been allocated record funding for their cost share programs this year. Local nonprofits, land trusts, and watershed groups have secured grant funding to complement and add additional practices to their programs. Best of all, these groups are now coordinating their efforts through the [Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative](#) to ensure that you get the most relevant assistance for your farm. Financial and technical assistance is available to:

- Protect rural land in permanent conservation easements.
- Implement practices on farms that improve local water quality.
- Implement practices that build soil health.
- Enroll in water quality and carbon credit markets.

Implementing best management practices on local farms benefits everyone. The same practices that improve water quality for people downstream also improve soil health to grow better pastures. The time is NOW to get the ball rolling on farm conservation practices. Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative partners are ready to assist.



Photos from [Virginia's Cattle Story: The First Four Centuries](#)

Take a Walk Back: How Now, Red Cow?

Augusta County ranks first in Virginia in beef cattle production and second in milk cow production, but it didn't start out that way. In fact, cows are not indigenous to Virginia at all. Livestock was imported to eastern Virginia from England in the early 1600s. These foreign foragers were not used to the Virginia flora and failed to thrive until the grasses and other plants that traveled with them across the ocean were planted by settlers and naturally germinated. Once the familiar feed grew, the cattle count beefed up, so to speak. By the 1630s, farmers in eastern Virginia had enough livestock that the livestock themselves became cash cows! Some 70 years later, Scotch Irish families moved to the Shenandoah Valley from Pennsylvania and began cattle farming in Augusta County.

With today's predominantly black cattle breeds, you might suspect that early-American cows were ancestors of today's Angus or Holstein breeds. Nope! The most common cattle were variations of red, and the settlers called them scrub cattle. Scrub cattle were a sturdy lot capable of producing some dairy and providing tough meat (think stews), leather, oil, bone, and horn. Farmers marked their cows with uniquely shaped ear cropping (cut from the floppy part of the ear) and/or distinctly shaped and sounding cowbells so that they could hear their cattle roaming from a distance away.

Back then, of course, all cows were free-range animals, and farmers hired drovers to guide their cattle up into the cooler mountains every spring. When fall arrived, drovers made their way back to the valley, some tracking right through the main streets of towns, stampeding over whatever was in their way like flowerbeds, fences, and the occasional front porch. In the decades that followed, farmers fenced their properties from neighboring lands to prevent livestock from destroying crops, getting hurt, and breeding indiscriminately. To read more about the history of cattle in Virginia, grab a copy of **Virginia's Cattle Story: The First Four Centuries** by Katharine Brown and Nancy Sorrells. Don't wait until the cows come home. Get your copy today!