Page News & Courier "Water Matters"
Page Wetlands Serve as Source of Drinking Water for Some Residents

Wetlands are some of the most diverse ecosystems in the world. They serve as important habitat for waterfowl, amphibians, dragonflies, shorebirds, and reptiles. Wetlands are also areas of great plant diversity, offering varying water depths. They provide flood control by slowing water and acting as a reservoir, trapping pollutants, and recharging groundwater among many other functions. However, Virginia has lost more than 40% of its wetlands over the last 200 years.

Wetlands have been known by many names like swamps, bogs and marshes. Sometimes these terms were used to designate areas of land not considered valuable. Only fairly recently have we begun to realize what an intricate balance exists in wetlands and the services they provide. We can think of wetlands as our natural water purification system and as sponges in times of high precipitation.

Wetlands are areas where water has a significant presence in the soil for a large portion of the year. This, in turn, determines the plant and animal life at the site. However, wetlands come in many types, from wooded swamps, to wet meadows, and small vernal pools that are only wet for a few months in the spring.

How do we identify wetlands? Low spots on topographic maps, wet fields on aerial photos and hydric soils on soil maps all provide clues. Field observation includes areas where water ponds after rain events, seasonal wet spots in fields or woods, the presence of wetland vegetation like cattails, and evidence of ditching and draining.

In Page County, we have some unique wetlands called sinkhole wetlands or karst depressional wetlands. These wetlands contain plants rare to the Shenandoah Valley, stay wetter longer than other types of wetlands, and are also connected to underground aquifers – a source of drinking water for many residents.

Because of their unique ecological role, wetlands deserve protection. Historically, in the name of flood protection, mosquito control and agriculture, many wetlands in Virginia have been ditched, drained, or otherwise altered. Currently development is one of the biggest threats. Protection can be accomplished through regulations at all levels of government including local development and stormwater ordinances. Individual actions play a role, too. Wetlands should not be used as garbage dumps, watering or grazing areas for livestock, drained, or flooded to create ponds.

Degraded wetland sites also present opportunities for restoration. Suitable restoration sites include wet spots in fields, often where ditches were created to drain the field. Sometimes the protocol is as simple as filling in the ditch to reverse the artificial drainage. Other times more extensive excavation may be necessary to build a low berm to capture rainfall.

Many restored wetlands are designed to be shallow, seasonal wetlands, meaning they will typically be flooded during the late fall, winter and early spring. However, they are designed to go partially dry in summer which encourages plant growth. These plants provide cover for nesting wildlife and a food source for migrating birds in the colder months.

Financial assistance is available for restoring and protecting wetlands, particularly those in agricultural settings. To learn more about wetlands in Virginia, start with the following websites: http://www.deq.virginia.gov/wetlands/wetlands.html and http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural_heritage/nctoc.shtml.

This is the twelfth in a series of articles addressing Page County's Water Resources and was written by Austin Jamison, Habitat Planner in the Blue Ridge Division of Chesapeake Wild Heritage, an organization dedicated to creating, restoring and protecting wildlife habitat and establishing a more sustainable agriculture through direct action, education and research in partnership with private landowners. For more information contact Austin Jamison at 434-825-7587, ajamison@cheswildlife.org or the Page County Water Quality Advisory Committee at 540-743-4808, canderson@pagecounty.virginia.gov.