Water Matters – September 2009
Water Concerns Attendees of the Page Valley Fair

Thanks to all who stopped by Page County Water Quality Advisory Committee/Department of Environmental Services booth at the 2009 Page Valley Fair. We really appreciate folks' interest in environmental issues and concern for protecting our natural resources. We received many good questions and had some great conversations regarding the work of the Friends of Shenandoah River which we also represented.

"Have they determined the cause of the fish kill?" one gentleman asked. Ongoing research indicates that fish bacteria are a potential cause of lesions and death among redbreast sunfish, smallmouth bass and rock bass that occurred within the upper James, Jackson, Cowpasture, and the Shenandoah rivers. Studies are concentrating on a specific pathogen called *Aeromonas salmonicida*. Typically, the bacterium does not survive the warmer summer temperatures so scientists are trying to determine if it is reintroduced into the rivers annually or whether "cold water" spots exist in or near the affected rivers enabling the bacterium to survive from one year to the next. Although these bacteria are the apparent cause of the lesions, fish normally have to be under some kind of stress for these bacteria to be able to cause the acute conditions that result in fish death. Other research is looking at emerging contaminants and the various combinations of factors that weaken the immune systems of fish and make them more susceptible to disease attack.

Another gentleman came by the booth to purchase a copy of the Shenandoah River Atlas. This fascinating book chronicles the way the River shaped the history of the Valley – its families, its transportation, commerce and towns. The Atlas also illustrates this history through a series of helpful maps. The gentleman was particularly interested in the Grove Hill Water Power Tunnel near Rincaca's Corner just north of the town of Shenandoah. According to the Atlas, the Tunnel was started in 1910 and designed to provide a 19 foot fall at the lower end. It was never finished and has since collapsed. This is the only known water power tunnel on the River, but there may have been others.

"That's a helgramite!" exclaimed one youngster, pointing to a poster of benthic invertebrates. He proceeded to identify the critters he had seen in the stream behind his house and asked the names of the few he did not know. "I want to see one of those", he said, pointing to a netspinner. We were delighted with his knowledge and interest in knowing his stream and the biodiversity which indicates a healthy water way. We congratulated his parents on raising such an astute young man who obviously spent enough time outdoors to develop a keen interest in the environment.

We also had several conversations with adults who felt a deep connection to the Shenandoah Valley, its waters and its land. They expressed their love for the beauty of the rolling farmland. They also voiced their concern over controlling the sprawl which could make Page County look like every other generic place that has not identified and protected their working farms, natural areas and other special places. We encouraged these citizens to attend the Page County Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission meetings and stay informed on the decisions which will affect the way Page County looks and grows in the future.

One lady came by to request a copy of the brochure "Tree Topping: What It Is, Why it's Bad and How to Prevent It". She was from the northeast originally and said she had not seen the practice until she got to the Shenandoah Valley. She asked why people willingly deform their trees by having them

topped. “Don’t they know this practice weakens the tree and, in many cases, kills it?” she asked. We gave her a copy of the brochure and informed her that the Page County Tree Board is mailing a copy of the brochure to each tree company in Page County and in several surrounding counties in the hopes of educating tree workers on the devastating effects of the practice.

We had many other great conversations ranging from white nose syndrome (which is killing Virginia’s bats) to questions concerning recycling, holding litter cleanups and reporting oil sheens on the Shenandoah. We also gathered 10 bags of plastic soda and water bottles for recycling – many thanks to those who placed their bottles in the recycling bins.

If you have questions regarding the environment, information you would like to share, suggestions or would like to volunteer, please contact us at (540) 743-4808 or canderson@pagecounty.virginia.gov.

This is the eighteenth article in a series addressing Page County’s Water Resources and was written by Chris Anderson, Page County Environmental Coordinator.