Water Matters Article

Incentives Offered to Help Restore Mill Creek and Hawksbill Creek

The Shenandoah Valley Soil & Water Conservation District has been involved with a grant aimed at helping to clean up Mill and Hawksbill Creeks in Page County. The clean up is a result of these creeks being placed on the Commonwealth of Virginia's Impaired Waters List in 1998 for excess amounts of fecal coliform bacteria. The bacteria come from four main sources: humans (improperly treated sewage), agriculture, wildlife and fertilizer runoff. Since the creeks were listed as impaired, a clean-up plan has been written by state and federal agencies and along with the plan came money to help with restoration efforts. The Conservation District is in charge of carrying out this clean-up or 'Implementation Plan'.

Two District staff members, Megan O'Gorek, Residential Technician and Wesley Hedrick, Agricultural Technician are focused on working with residents and farmers in the Mill and Hawksbill Creek watersheds to implement "best management practices" or BMPs to help reduce the excess amounts of bacteria entering the Mill and Hawksbill Creeks.

Agricultural BMPs include fencing livestock out of streams and providing an alternate water source, manure storage facilities to control runoff, and stream bank restoration. Technical assistance is available to help farmers decide on the BMPs best suited for their farm as well as funding available to help offset some of the costs of installing these practices. The agricultural cost-share program has been available to farmers for many years in Page County, but this TMDL program offers greater incentives to folks that live in these watersheds. Several farmers have utilized the cost-share program to fence out cattle from water bodies and install a rotational grazing system with utilization of alternative water sources. When implemented, these practices eliminate direct deposition in the creek or other water body, provide a clean alternative water source for livestock and provide a system for improved forage production and reduced the amount of runoff and bacteria leaving the farm. A farmer is eligible to receive up to 85% of the project's total cost and implementation of these practices improves animal health and farm productivity.

Residential BMPs are aimed at helping homeowners reduce the amount of bacteria that reaches the creeks. These practices include incentives for pumping septic tanks, repairing or replacing failing septic systems or installing a septic system to replace a straight pipe which delivers raw, untreated sewage directly into the closest stream. The cost-share program pays for at least 50% of the cost to install these practices. Since 2008, many residents in these watersheds have taken advantage of the program. Over 90 septic tanks have been pumped out and over 30 septic systems were repaired or replaced utilizing program funds to help offset the costs.

Believe it or not, pet waste was found to be one of the causes of excess bacteria in these creeks. The District is also offering an incentive to try to curb bacteria that comes from pet waste entering Mill and Hawksbill Creeks. The District received funding to distribute approximately 100 pet waste digesters to pet owners in the Mill and Hawksbill watersheds. The digesters work like a mini-septic system, utilizing natural bacteria and enzymes to reduce pet waste to a liquid that can then be applied to the ground and absorbed, thus greatly reducing the amounts of fecal coliform bacteria that reach the creeks. The pet waste composters help landowners clean up after their pets and collect the waste in one central location rather than leaving it spread out across the lawn.

These special cost share incentives are part of a 5 year implementation plan that has almost reached the half way point. Land owners who are interested to learn more should contact the following conservation technicians.

If you are interested in installing a pet waste digester, or are in need of septic system repairs, contact Megan O'Gorek, Residential Technician at (540) 742-4634.

If you are interested in learning more about the agricultural BMP program, contact Wesley Hedrick at (540) 742-4635.

This is the twenty third article in a series addressing Page County's Water Resources and was written by Megan O'Gorek and Wesley Hedrick. For more information contact the Shenandoah Valley Soil & Water Conservation District at (540) 433-2853. For more information on other water quality protection initiatives, contact Chris Anderson at (540) 743-4808 or canderson@pagecounty.virginia.gov..