Page News & Courier "Water Matters" – May 15, 2008
Farmers Adopt Management Practices for a Healthier Environment

Safeguarding Page County's abundant rivers, springs and ponds requires the use of sound land use practices. Everything we do on the land, ultimately, affects the run off that enters our streams and groundwater.

Understanding this important connection, several Valley farmers have adopted improved farming practices to assure cleaner water, a healthier environment and, in many cases, better farm management.

The Page County farms of Bennie Cubbage, Jeff Jennings and Julian Price serve as outstanding examples of what resource-sensitive management practices can do to improve both the environment and the farm, all while enhancing farm operations.

Financial and technical assistance is available to local farmers through various federal and state programs, all authorized through the federal Farm Bill. The Shenandoah Valley Soil and Water Conservation District (serving Page and Rockingham Counties) manages state funding and provides guidance to farmers for design, installation and maintenance of the BMPs.

More common among these programs are the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to address soil, water and natural resource concerns; the closely-related Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to voluntarily retire environmentally sensitive lands from farming; and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to promote the dual goals of agricultural production and environmental quality.

Bennie Cubbage owns a cattle farm not far from Springfield on the South Fork of the Shenandoah River. Over the years, he has fenced cattle out of Big Spring Branch and the South Fork Shenandoah River, installed off-stream watering systems, built hardened cattle crossings which protect stream beds, and put-up cross fencing for rotational grazing. According to Bennie, once he fenced his cattle out of the South Fork, a dense, healthy stand of volunteer trees and shrubs re-established itself. Ten years later, it now provides excellent wildlife habitat.

On the west side of the South Fork across from Leakesville, Jeff Jennings has taken riparian lands on either side of a small creek out of crop production by planting switch grass, fenced cattle out of an environmentally-sensitive area then planted mixed hardwoods, and built a hardened cattle walkway. In another pasture, Jeff fenced an old farm pond and installed a gravity feed watering system for the cattle.

East of the Jennings farm near Leakesville, Julian Price installed more than a half mile of fencing along the South Fork including steep ravines feeding into the River and drilled a well to water the cattle. He also installed cross fencing to permit rotational grazing. On another pasture, Julian fenced a once-perennial stream-gone-intermittent and installed an off-stream watering system enhancing the environment and creating a dependable water supply.

While all of these projects provide outstanding environmental benefits, most also enhance farm management through improved practices and facilities. Fencing cattle out of streams and ponds reduces loss of land to erosion, provides more central watering systems and provides cleaner water for cattle to drink. Bennie Cubbage believes that off-stream watering systems are more reliable, easier to maintain, and avoid the need to chop ice for watering in the winter. Jennings adds that clean water for cattle probably improves herd health as well. Rotational grazing improves vegetative cover, prolongs forage production and easier-to-manage cattle.

This is the fourth in a series of articles addressing Page County's water resources. For more information or to join the Watershed Management Planning Committee, contact the Page County Water Quality Advisory Committee at (540) 743-4808. This article was written by Wink Hastings, landscape architect, National Park Service, Chesapeake Watershed Assistance Program.