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New Planning Tool for the South Fork of the Shenandoah River Watershed

The South Fork of the Shenandoah River flows for 53 miles through Page County. However, its headwaters are near Waynesboro and the River flows through Rockingham, Page and Warren Counties before joining the North Fork to form the Main Stem of the Shenandoah River. It then joins the Potomac River at Harpers Ferry on its way to the Chesapeake Bay. By the year 2010, almost a quarter of a million people are expected to live in the watershed of the South Fork of the Shenandoah River.

A new study entitled, *South Fork Shenandoah Rapid Watershed Assessment,* compiles information to help citizens, planners and local decision-makers understand the dynamics of the watershed and how to protect the Valley's fragile natural resources.

Conducted by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) in 2007, the project is an effort to identify additional strategies to meet conservation needs in the Watershed. The study provides an overview of existing conditions of natural resources and uses citizen participation to identify "gaps" where current efforts fail to meet resource concerns.

The assessment describes the physical characteristics of the watershed such as precipitation, climate, forest and agricultural resources and land use. It also assesses resource impacts like water withdrawals, polluted waters, fish and wildlife, water quality trends, and threatened and endangered species. Population and demographic information provides readers with an understanding of the social aspects of the Valley including agricultural activities, land conservation and a range of specially-designed land management practices (known as *best management practices*).

In the process of developing this planning tool, a number of interesting trends were identified. In an effort to better identify the factors that determine a landowner's willingness to participate in conservation programs, DCR worked with James Madison University to analyze various characteristics of landowners who had previously participated in such conservation programs. An interesting geographic trend in the implementation of best management practices by landowners quickly became apparent. The on-the-ground distribution of implementation efforts suggested that early innovators who implement best management practices may have a significant influence on their neighbors' acceptance of similar measures. The benefits of word of mouth encouragement by neighbors are already at work here in Page County and will hopefully increase.

Additionally, a cursory survey of asking prices for land in the watershed coupled with net farm income and average costs to landowners of implementing various best management practices revealed some of the economic obstacles and financial pressures that many landowners, particularly farmers, are facing in the watershed today. A review of stakeholder input in the watershed showed that the preservation of the agricultural character that has historically defined the Shenandoah Valley region remains very important to residents.

The assessment includes a summary table of ideas to address concerns like the loss of farmland to development, the costs of agricultural best management practices, and the need for education to improve home septic system maintenance.

The primary goal of the South Fork Shenandoah Rapid Watershed Assessment was to determine how local, state and federal programs might better address concerns that landowners have about natural resources, particularly water quality, in the region. Currently, DCR is working to pursue opportunities for collaboration with potential partners to pursue these new ideas to address the concerns in a way that better meets the needs of Valley communities.

For more information or for a copy of the document, contact Nesha Mizel at (540) 332-9238. This is the eighth in a series of articles addressing Page County's Water Resources. This article was submitted by Nesha Mizel, Department of Conservation & Recreation, one of the authors of the South Fork Shenandoah Rapid Watershed Assessment and member of the Page County Watershed Management Team.