Water Matters – June 2009
Shenandoah Valley Soil & Water Conservation District

As the Page County Water Quality Advisory Committee works to protect our local water quality and quantity, we also have the opportunity to work with other local, regional and state agencies committed to the same mission.

The Shenandoah Valley Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) is one such agency working on behalf of all Page County residents. Technical assistance and funding are provided by this District to both Page and Rockingham Counties to address agricultural and residential nonpoint source pollution.

The District is one of 47 Conservation districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Funding for BMPs and other activities comes from the local, state, federal and private sources.

"The District is administering cost-share assistance to Page County residents of Mill and Hawksbill Creek watersheds for septic pump-outs and repairs," says Charles Newton, chair of the Page County Water Quality Advisory Committee and one of the six elected directors of the District. "Citizens can receive half the cost (about $125) to help cover the cost of septic pump-outs. This helps protect our water quality by keeping malfunctioning systems from potentially leaking raw sewage into our ground water and it may help homeowners avoid costly rehabilitation or replacement of their septic system." Because of citizen support for water clean-up activities, organized by the Page Water Quality Advisory Committee, VA-DCR agreed to provide up to $5 Million over 5 years to implement this bacteria reduction Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) program. This financial assistance will be available for the next four years, as long as VA-DCR sees evidence of significant progress toward meeting the goals of the TMDL bacteria reduction plan.

The SWCD also encourages farmers to take part in the voluntary cost-share programs to fence cattle out of streams, construct litter storage units, plant riparian buffers, practice rotational grazing and a number of other practices shown to help improve water quality.

"We have had a lot of success in working with the agricultural community in Page County," says Dave Frackelton, chair of the District. "There is always more that we can do to improve our water resources and we want to work with farmers interested in installing these conservation measures."

The District also focuses on other areas such as dam maintenance, working with other agencies and localities on inspections and maintenance of the 11 flood control dams. Two of these are located in Page County – at Lake Arrowhead and Lake Morningstar.

Education is an important outreach tool and the Soil and Water Conservation District staff provides presentations about the District activities upon request. Look for their booths at the Page and Rockingham County fairs later this summer. The annual 'Envirothon' environmental competition is sponsored by the District as well as the Youth Conservation Camp held at Virginia Tech in July. Scholarships are given to students pursuing careers in agricultural or environmental curricula.

Currently, the SWCD is updating its strategic plan. Focus meetings have determined the following as probable priority areas for the next year: addressing outdated sewer systems, problems inherent with urbanization, more public education, the need for increased flexibility in models and programs, more coordination between agencies, budget constraints, and the upcoming Chesapeake Bay TMDL.

“Protecting soil and water is so important to everyone,” says Linda Campbell, a long term Page County resident and an elected director of the District. “It is vital that we work together to utilize the limited resources in the best way possible. The Soil and Water Conservation District draws together people to address the problems and come up with solutions that consider the needs of both the community and the landowner.”

For more information on the SWCD, call 540-433-2853 or 540-743-4808. This is the sixteenth article in a series addressing Page County’s Water Resources and was written by Chris Anderson, Page County Environmental Coordinator and associate director of the Shenandoah Valley Soil & Water Conservation District.