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Partnership to Connect State Resources and Local Expertise to Help Landowners Maintain Healthy Streams and Resilient Farms

NEW MARKET, VA, January 12, 2025—Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley, supported by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), is launching a new effort to assist landowners with riparian forest buffer maintenance. Drawing on the diverse strengths of partners in the Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative (SVCC), the project provides the hands-on support landowners need to achieve clean water goals and maintain healthy, resilient agricultural landscapes.

Riparian buffers are areas of dense vegetation along a river or stream. These buffers help to slow runoff and filter nutrients before they reach the waterway and prevent erosion of stream banks. According to DCR, these are among the most cost-effective best management practices (BMPs) for reducing sediment and nutrient pollution. They are also highly visible to the public. When well maintained, they generate increased public support for state and federal investments in conservation. They produce important co-benefits like wildlife habitat connectivity, carbon sequestration, and improved herd health. Despite these benefits, Virginia experienced a decrease in the miles of buffer planted in 2024 after two strong years of growth in 2022 and 2023, according to the group Chesapeake Progress.

“We believe that better maintenance of buffers will increase planting of new buffers in our region, since 1. poorly maintained buffers are the worst marketing possible for new buffers and 2. the time and effort required to properly maintain a buffer is a well-known barrier to landowners’ decision to adopt the practice,” said Kevin Tate, Director of Conservation at Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley and SVCC Coordinator.

The Commonwealth of Virginia is supporting this maintenance through a \$272,604 grant awarded to Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley on behalf of the SVCC by the Department of Conservation and Recreation. Support from this grant will be available to maintain newly planted

riparian buffers as well as older, mature riparian buffers. Maintenance activities will include tree survival checks and replacement of dead trees, tree tube maintenance and replacement, and treatment of invasive species. SVCC intends to provide multiple years of follow-up maintenance to participating landowners, as consistent, routine maintenance of buffers has been shown to produce the best outcomes.

Eric Reiley, a rural landowner in Shenandoah County, provides an excellent example of the ways that SVCC partners and private landowners have worked together to maintain a riparian buffer on Pughs Run, a tributary of the North Fork of the Shenandoah River.

“We planted an 18-acre riparian forest buffer through the Virginia Agricultural Cost-Share (VACS) program in 2020,” explains Reiley. “I dedicated much time and effort to maintaining the planting and saw good tree survival. But by 2023, even with my dedicated efforts, pressure from invasive species, particularly Autumn Olive, threatened to out-compete the planted trees in several areas of the buffer. It was simply more than I could control on my own. Through my relationship with SVCC partners, I was connected to Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley who provided financial assistance for me to hire a contractor to combat the invasive species before they took over. Follow up advice from the Department of Forestry and a visit from an Appalachian Conservation Corps maintenance crew in 2024 has helped me steward my buffer to become a maturing riparian forest.”

SVCC’s grant application included letters of support from a number of regional and state organizations, including Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF).

“The proposed project will build on many years of successful partnership. The SVCC facilitates communication and teamwork between organizations, organizes effective outreach that increases landowner recruitment, consistently overcomes barriers to best management practice installation, and creatively assists landowners with buffer maintenance,” wrote Patricia F. Nylander, Watershed Program Coordinator at DOF. “DOF staff have worked alongside SVCC for several years, and will be able to help direct landowners who may benefit from buffer maintenance on their projects to SVCC to get the work done with this funding.”

Megen Dalton, District Manager of the Shenandoah Valley Soil and Water Conservation District (SVSWCD), shared her support. “The SVSWCD has had a very successful partnership and strong working relations with the SVCC since the group’s inception. We are committed to working with farmers and rural landowners in our service area to maintain healthy riparian forest buffers along our streams, rivers, and creeks,” Dalton wrote. “With this funding, the SVCC will have the resources to greatly expand tested and proven maintenance programs and will use guaranteed

maintenance assistance as an incentive to increase landowner recruitment into riparian forest buffer planting programs.”

Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative (SVCC) unites 27 organizations and agencies in an effort to improve water quality and conservation outcomes in a top agricultural-producing region that contains the headwaters of two major Chesapeake Bay tributaries, the Shenandoah and James rivers. This partnership connects landowners with professional expertise and assistance programs to increase the adoption, effectiveness, and permanence of best management practices (BMPs) on agricultural and forest land to improve water quality and farm productivity.

Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley, a New Market-based nonprofit working to protect the Shenandoah Valley natural resources, cultural heritages, and rural character, has convened the SVCC since its inception in 2019. As the convener of the SVCC, Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley provides administrative support and coordination to achieve partners’ shared conservation goals. This includes applying for, administering, and reporting on shared grant funds, providing pass through grants or subawards to nonprofit partners, supporting staff positions such as Conservation Field Assistant embedded in Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Field Offices, and coordinating partner activities and outcomes.

For more information and inquiries about participation please contact Kevin Tate (ktate@shenandoahalliance.org, 540-383-3417) or your local NRCS, SWCD, or DOF representative.

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Photos for media use:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/lxa7x9hshhji0hvx6k9g8/AFyUhlGeBRCnsepwp5WMQys?rlkey=hok2chtveqf63ltvyxc4x8sgx&st=xz6u5me3&dl=0>

Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley works to ensure the Valley’s rural character, scenic beauty, clean water and vibrant communities are protected by providing accurate and timely information to community members and decision makers. We believe that, together, we can preserve what is important to community members and grow in ways that are sensitive to the extraordinary natural and cultural resources that distinguish our region. shenandoahalliance.org