



The Conservation Strip

John Marshall Soil & Water Conservation District

Tired of the Fescue Summer Brown-out and Toxicosis Issues? Go Native

By David Bryan, Private Lands Biologist, NRCS/DGIF/Virginia Tech

Across the John Marshall District we're right into the warm season again and for most Virginia grazers, this is the time of year when fescue pastures will start to brown out into the dreaded summer dormancy. Fescue is a highly versatile forage species, but this cool season forage simply isn't built to grow in the summer, especially the hot and dry ones that are common around these parts. It is also a well-known fact that fescue plays host to an endophyte fungus that causes a variety of negative impacts to livestock, most especially the constriction of blood vessels that interferes with a cow's ability to regulate its own body temperature. Ever won-



Cattle grazing a bluestem/Indiangrass mix in late June. These grasses provide optimal forage while also serving as great habitat for grassland birds. *Photo Credit: Justin Folks*

der why your cattle have been hanging out all day in the shade? It's not natural.

Enter native warm season grasses. Unlike fescue, native perennials such as Switchgrass, Indiangrass, Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, and Eastern Gammagrass thrive in the summer months. They photosynthesize using a different carbon pathway than fescue known as C⁴, and they also have 6-10 foot root systems, allowing them to harvest water and nutrients from deeper areas for vigorous growth in the hot summer months. You might say that they are hands-down the best drought insurance policy that money can buy. And they also aren't infected by an endophyte!

Often when farmers first hear of native grasses, their minds focus on Broomsedge, another warm season grass often seen on roadsides which admittedly is not a quality forage. While similar in structure, the species mentioned above are a world apart in terms of quality for cattle. The proof is in the research which has shown

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Summer 2018

Mission Statement

Our Mission is to provide leadership, technical assistance, information, and education to the citizens of Fauquier County in proper soil stewardship, agricultural conservation methods, and water quality protection so as to ensure the wise use of the county's natural resources.



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that these species, when managed correctly, can produce tremendous average daily gains in cattle each year – and with very little nitrogen or lime inputs! While typical toxic summer fescue gains may be 0.8 pounds per day per head (lbs/day), researchers at the University of Tennessee have shown that average steer gains over a 112 day growing season have averaged 1.74 lbs/day on Switchgrass and 2.11 lbs/day on a mix of Indiangrass and the Bluestems. Average heifer gains over the same season have averaged 1.54 lbs/day on Switchgrass and 2.01 lbs/day on a mix of Indiangrass and the Bluestems. Don't automatically assume that the Bluestem mix is the best choice, though, as the Switchgrass produces a good deal more biomass per acre and thus can support more cattle for greater beef gains in total than the Bluestem mix. Regardless, these forages are something to seriously consider on any farm. Move over, fescue, you've got some serious competition!

Optimally a quarter to a third of ones' forage base should be considered for conversion to natives as part of a well-managed rotational grazing system where the rest of the fields are left in cool season forage for the spring and fall. However, it is always wise to convert in stages, spreading out your risk and the associated costs of establishment over several years. Twenty-percent would be a good starting place for grazers looking to get some experience with the grasses before investing more land.

Interested? Reach out to your local District staff, NRCS office in Warrenton, or your Private Lands Biologist David Bryan at 804-287-1661 for technical assis-

tance that can help you determine if natives might be a good fit on your farm. Additionally, NRCS has recently launched a new program, "Working Lands for Wildlife", designed to provide financial assistance to grazers interested in getting native grass forages on their land, thereby improving their forage base and bottom line. Fauquier County is a priority area for this program which gives applicants extra ranking points and a better chance of being funded. The program covers a large percentage of the costs that it takes to convert a fescue pasture to natives and will include a prescribed grazing plan. And yes, as the program title suggests, these forages also are great for wildlife, providing critical nesting structure to grassland and shrubland bird species such as the elusive Northern Bobwhite quail. It is a win-win for everyone – the farmer, the cows and the birds. Give us a call, we look forward to discussing this opportunity with you!



Want summer grazing? These cattle were mob grazing 100+ acres of Switchgrass on a hot July afternoon in Southside Virginia. You won't see that on fescue! *Photo Credit: Barbara Bowen*

Spring Tree Planting Wrap-Up

This spring, the John Marshall Soil & Water Conservation District conducted 6 tree plantings, with over 160 volunteers planting approximately 900 trees and creating 5.8 acres of new forested riparian buffer. This effort could not have been done without the help

from our local partners: Friends of the Rappahannock, Goose Creek Association, Piedmont Environmental Council, and the Virginia Department of Forestry. Thank you to all of our awesome partners and volunteers for a successful planting season.

Education Workshops a Success



Educators work on a Project WET activity at a workshop in January.

From January to May, the John Marshall SWCD hosted a total of three workshops for local teachers and educators at the Fauquier Outdoor Lab.

Two of the workshops were for Project WET and one was for Project Flying WILD. A total of 38 local educators participated in the three workshops.

Project WET (which stands for “Water Education for Teachers”) is a nationally-developed water education program. The Project Wet Curriculum and Activity Guide for kindergarten through 12th grades is a collection of hands-on

water-related activities which can be used in the classroom or the field. Project WET addresses water’s chemical and physical properties, quantity and quality issues, aquatic wildlife, ecosystems and management strategies.

Project Flying WILD focuses on celebrating birds and offers practical hands-on classroom and outdoor field investigation experiences connecting real-world experiences in bird biology, conservation, and natural history. Project based classroom applications, service learning, and community involvement are part of the curriculum.

Many who attended these workshops felt that the activities would be beneficial to their work and would be using them in the near future. Plans are in the works for future workshops. If you are interested in a future workshop, please contact Michael Trop at 540-316-6639 or michael.trop@fauquiercounty.gov to get on the information list.

VCAP Changes

For the past few years, the John Marshall SWCD has been administering the Virginia Conservation Assistance Program (VCAP) in Fauquier County. There have been a few recent changes to the program that may affect eligibility of some participants or practices.

To qualify for VCAP, a practice must now address a water quality issue on a property (in the past, drainage issues could qualify, but that will no longer be the case unless they also address a water quality issue). Another big change is that structures must be at least 3 years old to qualify for VCAP.

There are a couple of changes in the cost-share caps: Constructed Wetlands are now capped at \$3,500 and Living Shorelines are now capped at \$15,000. All applicants will be limited to \$50,000 in total cost-share per calendar year.

Other changes include changes in rankings, limits on

volunteer labor, and changes in allowable costs. Full information can be found in the VCAP Manual which can be found at <http://vaswcd.org/vcap>.

For further information or to request a site assessment for your property, contact Michael Trop or Kris Jarvis at 540-347-3120 x3.



A completed conservation landscaping VCAP Project at the Piedmont Environmental Council office in Warrenton.

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NRCS Women’s Learning Circle

NRCS will be hosting a series of Women’s Learning Circles this fall in Loudoun County for women landowners who are interested in learning more about conservation and agricultural resources. The meetings will be held on September 12, October 16 (rain date October 17), and October 30. The locations are still to be deter-

mined; however they will likely be in central or western Loudoun.

The first meeting will focus on an introduction to conservation resources. The second meeting will dive into conservation practices and will include a field trip to see some local conservation practices that have been implemented. The third meeting topic will be up to the group and options may include: wildlife habitat, forest management, easements, whole farm plans, farm transitioning, etc. All participants should be present at all three meetings.

The workshops are free to attend, but registration is required. For questions, please contact Casey Iames at casey.iames@va.usda.gov



Calendar of Events

July 1		Start of Fiscal Year—New Cost-Share program starts	
July 4		John Marshall SWCD Office Closed	
July 11	4:00 PM	John Marshall SWCD Board Meeting	CANCELLED
July 11-14		Fauquier County Fair	County Fairgrounds
August 8	4:00 PM	John Marshall SWCD Board Meeting	JMSWCD Office
September 3		John Marshall SWCD Office Closed	
September 12	4:00 PM	John Marshall SWCD Board Meeting	JMSWCD Office

Staying Connected: The John Marshall SWCD makes it easy to stay connected through social media. If you’re on Facebook, “Like” our page to get updates on what’s happening at the District.



The Conservation Strip is a quarterly publication of the John Marshall Soil & Water Conservation District. To be added to our email list, please send an email to Wendy Merwin at: wendy.merwin@fauquiercounty.gov.

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