

RIVERKEEPER'S Almanac

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CRA's Virgil Turner: *Farmers 'Receptive'*

Two months into his job as Chester River Association's first-ever conservation planner, Virgil Turner reports that farmers have been "real receptive" to planting cover crops. "I haven't had anyone say they haven't been glad I came out to talk with them. No one has said: 'No, I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to cooperate.'"

In his new role, Turner serves as a liaison between local farmers and CRA, which is advocating cover crops as part of a new river initiative.

Turner, 67, is highly familiar with Kent County agricultural issues. He retired in 2004 from the Maryland Department of Agriculture after a 47-year career here as a conservation planner with the federal and state governments.

Since his appointment in mid-September, Turner has contacted half the 100 or so farmers in the Morgan Creek watershed, a target area because it has the heaviest run-off of nutrients and sediments in the county. He said a good many farmers and operators are learning about what CRA actually does for the first time.

"Most just don't know that much about CRA. They feel in a lot of cases that CRA has kind of picked on the farming community without knowing all the facts. They're telling me they're glad we have an organization interested in keeping the Chester River healthy, but that they'd like to have more say in exactly what goes on with the river association," says Turner, who was raised on dairy farms in Kent and Queen Anne's counties. "If nothing else, they're interested in hearing about CRA."

Joe Hickman manages 14,000 acres on the Upper Shore, including

several farms in the Morgan Creek watershed. He's an "on and off" member of CRA and, like most farmers in the area, he has a longstanding relationship with Turner.

He calls the new program "a good idea."

As Hickman puts it: "There have been some adversarial relations between farmers, farm producers and people attuned to the river. Sometimes there's good science, but politics gets involved. Hopefully with someone like Virgil – someone we trust, he knows the programs and what farmers need to do – we can all do the right thing. Virgil will definitely help bridge the gap. It's good having someone you can trust to talk to to at least make your points."

Hickman himself has been planting cover crops the last couple of years. He says that next fall – the cover crop planting season runs from early September through mid-October – he will plant even more.

"We've always cared about the Chester and the Bay," he says. "But financial incentives are necessary. Everyone wants to do the right thing; sometimes you can't afford to do the right thing."

Two-thirds of Kent County lands are held in agriculture but only 13 percent are planted in cover crops, which help prevent run-off into the river. CRA hopes to see that figure climb to 50 percent. In his talks with farmers, Turner is encouraging them to apply for state funds that pay for cover crops – typically rye, wheat, oats or barley. The state currently pays farmers up to \$50 an acre to plant cover crops.

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Chester Riverkeeper Tony Prochaska, left, and Virgil Turner.



One Year and Counting: *Update on the Corsica*

The clock is ticking on Maryland's Corsica River Targeted Watershed Project – a pilot program that aims to clean up this major tributary of the Chester in five years.

Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr. announced the landmark \$19.4 million effort in September, 2005. "I feel like we're finally up and running," Danielle Lucid of Maryland's Department of the Environment (MDE) said recently. "I've seen a lot of groups come together on big projects, and it can take a year to figure out what has to be done, who's going to do it, who's on first and what's really going on."

The Corsica was chosen for a number of reasons, one of which was the excellence of the Watershed Restoration Action Strategy (WRAS) submitted to the state in 2003 by the town of Centreville and its partners. This past May, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) judged the Corsica WRAS to be the best in the country, it only raised the stakes for those charged with turning strategies into clean water.

Goals and obstacles

John McCoy is head of the Ecosystem Restoration Center at the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the project's coordinator. He can tick off the progress his multi-agency team has made on 11 major goals – among them, six percent of the planned reforested buffer plantings have been completed; eight percent of the wetlands restoration; and 53 percent of the oyster-spat seeding. But the biggest accomplishment this year, he believes, has been identifying obstacles.

"We're learning that we have to change the way we do business," McCoy says, adding that his favorite example is the goal to retrofit 30 septic systems with de-nitrification technology. "We thought we could make grants to individual homeowners, but in reality that money is reimbursable, which means they have to come up with \$10,000 up front. Then, when they're reimbursed by the state, there's a tax on the reimbursement. So we're finding that once we get down in the weeds on these goals, we have to re-examine how to get the funding to the right people at the right time."

On the other hand, local energy is compensating for frustrating snags. The all-volunteer Corsica River Conservancy (CRC) is the lead group for local participation in the effort, and members have been

busy planting rain gardens, producing mailings and events, and talking to everyone from school children to public officials about getting involved. CRC estimates that 350 people attended the inaugural Corsica River Awareness Day in early November at Bloomfield Farm near Centreville.

New positions funded

As for implementation, federal funding is expected to add some heft soon by paying for three new positions – a coordinator to help Centreville organize its own improvements, including retrofitting stormwater management, as well as two slots with the Queen Anne's Soil Conservation District and the Cooperative Extension.

Frank DiGalleonardo, CRC president, believes the sophisticated water quality data the project is generating represents a big advance. In addition to the weekly testing on the river's main stem by conservancy members, and the "continuous monitoring buoys" already in place, 24-hour monitoring stations have been installed at the end of the tidal portions of three Corsica tributaries: Gravel Run, Millstream and Three Bridges.

Ground water monitoring wells have also been dug, four of which are in DiGalleonardo's own backyard. "We'll get solid baseline data on nutrients, and we'll know if we're making progress," he says. Additional analysis of the data will be made possible by EPA, which added the Corsica to its National NonPoint Source Monitoring Program last spring. According to MDE, the projects chosen are those deemed likely to show positive results when best management practices are put in place, providing a model for watershed restoration efforts nationwide.

McCoy praises local partners for providing a reality check to keep the project on track. "Federal, state and local governments, when left to our own devices, get the limited results we've gotten over the years," he says. "We need local people to keep leading and keep this all sustainable."

To learn more:
www.corsicariverconservancy.org
www.dnr.maryland.gov

– Pat Herold Nielsen

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"The purpose of the program is to call on farmers and steer them toward conservation practices that benefit them from a financial standpoint and benefit the river from a water quality standpoint," according to Tony Prochaska, the Chester Riverkeeper. "It's a win-win."

Turner, meantime, continues to push for cooperation.

"I think I know just about every farmer in the county. These are good people. They are in business to make money and they're going to do what it takes to make money. But if they can do what it takes and use good conservation practices, they're more than willing to do it," says Turner. "They want to make a difference, just as much as the next guy. One thing I missed most from my job was the contact with farmers and landowners. They were more like friends to me. It's good to be back."

– Ellen Uzelac

New Members Add Depth to CRA Board

Chester River Association has added four members to the board of the non-profit river advocacy organization.

"They bring a cross-section of skills we need on the board. The strength of our board has always been its diversity," noted Bob Parks, CRA's executive director. "Banking, advertising, marketing, the arts – it's a wealth of backgrounds these four people bring."

The new members:

- Thad Bench, a marketing entrepreneur, is the founder of Benchworks, which specializes in the development of marketing promotions and online company stores for mid-size to Fortune 500 clients. Clients include Heinz, GlaxoSmithKline and the Bahamas. The firm has offices in Worton, Chestertown, Los Angeles and New York.
- Jay Falstad, a watercolorist who lives on Unicorn Lake, has 16 years of advertising experience. A community activist, Falstad helped lead the fight against a Unicorn Lake rubblefill and was the co-recipient in June of CRA's first Riverkeeper award.
- Alan Griffith, who retired last year as vice chairman of The Bank of New York, has been visiting the Chesapeake region since 1963. He and his wife live on the Chester River at Piney Point Farm near Centreville. Griffith has served on the board of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation for over 10 years.
- Marcy Ramsey, active in CRA since it started 20 years ago, is a painter who finds her inspiration in the Chester River. She is also a well-known illustrator. Most recently, Ramsey served as CRA's volunteer membership chair.

"I just want to be a strong advocate for CRA. I look forward to making people aware of the important work CRA does in reminding folks just how fragile our water systems are and how important citizen participation is in providing long-term protection."

— Jay Falstad



RiverFest! 2006

Many thanks to our RiverFest volunteers and to everyone who came out to celebrate CRA's 20th anniversary. About 300 people joined us July 15 at Conquest Beach for swimming and seining, a diamondback terrapin release and the famous "marsh muck." Steel band and gospel music made the day but the skies opened just as Chester River Run-off was about to close it out with their signature brand of "new grass." We promise to bring them back soon and long before another 20 years go by.



Volunteer Voices

'Chester Tester' pushes for improved water quality

It's a long way from Montana to Maryland, but Ladd Rutherford made the move and the Chester River has been the beneficiary.

As CRA's newest Chester Tester, the 61-year-old Rutherford since August has been taking twice-monthly water samples from below the dam at Urieville Lake and streams at nearby Riley's Mill and Perkins Hill. The Riley's Mill samples have registered high in phosphates – a "potential issue," according to CRA Watershed Coordinator Brent Walls.

"We have filled our waters with... pollutants. It's not just the Chesapeake Bay region but the Mississippi Delta and waterways coast to coast," says Rutherford, a former orthopedics and hand surgeon who retired in 2004 as medical director of Bozeman (Mont.) Deaconess Hospital. "It's so overwhelming but if we can make people aware of the little things that cumulatively can make a difference, it could mean significant improvements in our water quality."

Rutherford's wife, Bonnie, became familiar with Chestertown years ago when two uncles attended Washington College. After 27 years of living in Montana, drawn by her memories of the Chesapeake Bay, it is Chestertown the couple now calls home.

A biology major at Stanford University, Rutherford attended medical school at the University of Illinois and did his surgical training at University of California at San Diego.

"One of my fantasies for the last 40 years was whether I made the right decision going into medicine instead of going into aquatic biology," says Rutherford, who has taken up rowing since his move from mountains to marshland.

"We need to get people educated [about river issues.] There are a lot of people here who have skills, the time and interests that can be, I hope, recruited and mobilized," he adds. "We all need to do our part."



The NEXT 20 Years

This year, Chester River Association celebrated its 20th anniversary. What do I see going forward? An organization that will continue to make a measurable difference, one step at a time. Here's what CRA is looking for: improved water clarity, the return of underwater grasses, and reductions in the frequency of harmful algal blooms that cause fish kills and threaten other aquatic and terrestrial species. We are hopeful that healthy fish, crab and shellfish populations will return, including economically and recreationally important species. We want people to use the river and its resources without worry.

Right now, less than 20 percent of our streams are considered of high quality. Until we rebalance the physical and chemical conditions of our waterways, intact aquatic communities cannot rebound. Remember, it's much easier to protect a high quality stream or river than it is to restore it. And even after impacts are removed, water bodies still need time to heal.

People are beginning to realize that their actions have an impact on our environment, and this trend must continue. In our

watershed, agriculture is the preferred land use, and many farmers are developing soil conservation and water quality plans that are extremely effective in protecting water quality. We must support their efforts with economic incentives if we want to preserve our way of life here, and everyone else must do their fair share as well.

Those fortunate enough to own land with a creek or stream running through it should realize they have a special responsibility to protect that resource, including our forests and marshes. Think of an aquatic ecosystem as a human body. Wetlands remove pollutants as water flows through them, just like kidneys remove toxins in the blood stream. Trees and plants take up nutrients and trap sediments. It's all connected.

I talk to my daughters all the time about the river; why I plant trees and warm season grasses; why trash hurts animals that try to eat it or get trapped in it. Over the next 20 years, we need to choose wisely. We need to make choices that will save this river for our kids, and theirs.

– Tony Prochaska, Chester Riverkeeper



Contact us:

Chester River Association Office:
410-810-7556

Bob Parks, Executive Director
bparks@chesterriverassociation.org

Tony Prochaska, Chester Riverkeeper
riverkeeper@chesterriverassociation.org

Brent Walls, Watershed Coordinator
bwalls@chesterriverassociation.org

Bobbi Marshall, Office Manager
bmarshall@chesterriverassociation.org

For more information visit our website:
www.chesterriverassociation.org

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100 North Cross Street, Suite One
Chestertown, Maryland 21620