

## Conserving Farmland Supports Agritourism



2015 Virginia Agritourism Conference  
Staunton, Virginia - March 11, 2015  
Andy Sorrell, Va. Dept. of Ag. & Consumer Services

## Background

- One of Virginia's greatest natural resources is its agricultural and forestal lands –once developed these lands can no longer provide Virginian's food, feed, fiber or fuel.
- Farms in Virginia are small – the average farm size is 181 acres and for many small farmers, farming is often not a small farmer's primary occupation
- Smaller farms continue to find it financially difficult to practice solely traditional agriculture like livestock and commodities (grains)
- Many small farmers are diversifying to non-traditional agriculture like raising specialty crops, direct-sale to the public, and agritourism activities

## Agritourism and the Small Farm

- Agritourism can be described as the junction between agriculture and tourism – a value-added activity that generates additional farm income and creates a loyal customer base for farm products
- when the public visits working farms to pick their own produce or cut a Christmas tree, tour wineries / cideries to buy (and taste) products, and participates in activities like weddings – Agritourism is occurring!
- Agritourism can be an important adaption strategy for overcoming economic disparity and enhancing the viability of small farms, particularly in places facing growth pressures

## Conserving the Farm Can Support Agritourism

- Permanent protection for working lands is accomplished through a conservation easement –a voluntary, legal agreement between a landowner and a third party that permanently limits the uses of the land in order to protect ag, forestal and other natural resource values
- Conservation easements allows the landowner to continue to own and use their land and to sell it or pass it onto heirs
- Easement spells out resources that need to be protected: should also defines what can be agritourism activities can be done – farmers need to know what they want to do so an easement can be drafted to accommodate their goals

## Incentives for Conserving the Farm

- Conservation easements can provide incentives and money to help support the farm: tax deductions, tax credits, estate and property tax benefits and cash payments to purchase and retire development rights from a farm via a conservation easement
- VDACS has a matching Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program that provides 1:1 matching state funding to localities that have established locally funded PDR programs
  - Since 2008: 15 localities – 65 easements – 9,000 acres
- USDA NRCS has Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP): Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) and Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE)

## Other Support for Conservation Easements and Working Lands

- VDACS organized the Working Lands Group in 2010 in response to the perception by some in the agricultural community that the donation of a conservation easement was not a viable option for protecting productive working lands
- In past, agritourism and working farms haven't always been seen as a good fit for traditional conservation easements
- Stakeholder group worked to make conservation easements more appealing to working farms & resulted in:

## Other Support for Conservation Easements and Working Lands con't

- Clarification of the Open Space Land Act definition in State Code: clearly recognizes "agricultural and forestal production" in the definition of "open space land"
- Produced the "working lands variant" to VOF's standard conservation easement template with primary purpose for use with agricultural and forestal lands
- Continue to present farmers with accurate information about the limits and advantages to placing parts of their land under conservation easements
  - developed Working lands brochure with VOF, Farm Bureau and VDACS
  - Conservation easement workshops geared towards farm and forest land owners -

## Upcoming Landowner Workshop in Blackstone this Friday March 13th



**LEARN & LEARN** **FRIDAY, MARCH 13, 2015**  
10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.

**FARM & FOREST CONSERVATION Resources for Landowners**

Join us for presentations and lunch, courtesy of Northern Farm Bureau, as we discuss voluntary programs in Virginia that help landowners protect working farms and forests. Topics will include:

- Easements and associated tax benefits
- Cost-share conservation opportunities
- Planning for farm succession
- Updates on legislation and news from Farm Bureau

Representatives from these organizations and agencies will be on hand to answer your questions:

**FARM BUREAU OF VIRGINIA** | **Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services** | **Virginia Department of Forestry**

**Virginia Cooperative Extension** | **NRCS** | **US Forest Service**

**Northern Piedmont Agricultural Research and Extension Center (NPARREC)**

2376 Overhill Road, Blackstone, VA 23019

March 13, 2015

10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.

**8:00 BY MARCH 6:**  
Holly Springs, North Carolina  
(843) 645-9376



## For Additional Information:

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