

Cover Crop/Nutrient Management TAC Subcommittee
Friday, October 2, 2026
Central High School Education Complex Auditorium
2748 Dogtown Road
Goochland, VA 23063
10:00 am – 3:00 pm

Welcome and Introductions

Ms. Marie Schirmacher called the meeting to order at 10:05am. A quorum of 16 voting members was present. Ms. Schirmacher delegated Marissa Roland, Olivia Leatherwood, and Crystal Lavin to take notes/minutes for the meeting, then reviewed TAC ground rules and actions that could be taken on each matrix item (advance, amend, defer, or table).

The subcommittee members and attendees introduced themselves:

Voting Members Present:

Marie Schirmacher, DCR
Allyson Ponn, Lord Fairfax SWCD
Alston Horn, Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Bryan Johnson, Virginia Farm Bureau Federation
Buck Tharpe, Southside SWCD
Cory Hoar, Virginia Dare SWCD
Courtney Coleman, Peanut SWCD
Keith Burgess, Monacan SWCD
Kemper Marable, Hanover-Caroline SWCD
Kevin Dunn, Piedmont SWCD
Shelby Foosness, Shenandoah Valley SWCD
Spencer Yaeger, Culpeper SWCD
Steve Jones, John Marshall SWCD
Tim Talley, Thomas Jefferson SWCD
Tom Hardiman, Virginia Grain Producers Association
Trevor Guy, Three Rivers SWCD

Non-voting Participants Present:

Andy Beahm, Monacan SWCD
Brandon Dillistin, Northern Neck SWCD
Crystal Lavin, DCR
Dave Kindig, Guest
Hunter Arehart, Shenandoah Valley SWCD
Hunter Gravatt, Hanover-Caroline SWCD
Jake Grove, John Marshall SWCD
Marissa Roland, DCR
Matt Carroll, Thomas Jefferson SWCD
Olivia Leatherwood, DCR
Sara Bottenfield, DCR

New Business

Use and Effectiveness of current specifications

Ms. Schirmacher reviewed the directive for reviewing practices in the manual. In calendar year 2026, the subcommittee will be reviewing a third of the Cover Crop/Nutrient Management specifications in the VACS Manual chosen based on the fewest number of completed instances in CAS since 2015.

CCI-RT: The subcommittee discussed that this practice is new and opted to leave the specification in the Manual as is to allow time to further review its use and effectiveness.

NM-7: The subcommittee discussed that while few Districts implement this practice, it is useful and effective and opted to leave the specification as is.

SL-15B: The subcommittee discussed that the practice is helpful for producers of crops with lower residue left behind and opted to leave the specification as is. The opportunity for training in regard to this specification was also discussed.

SL-3: It was discussed that this practice has very limited use due to unclear guidance on technical responsibility, and it is frequently handled more via federal incentive programs. The subcommittee opted to leave the specification as is and add it to the next calendar year's matrix for further review and discussion.

SL-3B: It was discussed that this practice has never been used; however, it is related to the SL-3, which will be brought to next calendar year's matrix. The subcommittee opted to leave the specification as is and add it to next calendar year's matrix for further review and discussion.

SL-8M: The subcommittee discussed that this practice is used by multiple districts and it is effective and opted to leave this specification as-is.

WQ-10: The subcommittee discussed that this specification is not being used and is serviced by other agencies, such as Virginia Cooperative Extension, and opted to remove it from the VACS Manual.

WQ-7: The subcommittee discussed that this specification is not being used and opted to remove it from the VACS Manual.

Motion to remove WQ-7 and WQ-10 from the VACS Manual by Keith Burgess, second by Kemper Marable. Motion carried unanimously.

Matrix Items

Ms. Schirmacher presented the matrix items in numerical order.

Item 1C: Offer an incentive to non-chemical kill downs such as crimping in our cover crop programs. Better for the soil, water, crops, etc. The equipment cost is another investment for the producer, and the incentive might defray that cost for more utilization of this method.

It was discussed that the VACS program does not pay an incentive for sprayers nor for different on-farm management types. It was also mentioned that this equipment would not qualify for tax credit. Ms. Schirmacher emphasized that this program is focused on cover-crop establishment and not on-farm management styles.

Motion to table as program focuses on establishment rather than on-farm management by Keith Burgess, second by Buck Tharpe; motion carried unanimously.

Item 2C: A Summer soil building cover crop practice to include planting summer annuals in Spring or early Summer, letting them grow all Summer, and leaving all the residue on the field. This would give producers an option for rejuvenating fields over the summer. When crop prices are thin some producers will not plant certain fields or less productive farms altogether. In these circumstances the producer could take advantage of the open summer season and plant a soil building cover crop to improve the soil for the following year.

The subcommittee discussed that the SL-8A practice already provides cost-share for summer cover crops.

Motion to table as requested change is covered under SL-8A by Buck Tharpe, second by Trevor Guy; motion carried unanimously.

Item 3C: Incentivize legumes commensurate with their expense, at an inadequate minimum. I recommend that the cost-share cover more than the expense, acting as an incentive to move conventional farmers toward more productive practices. Note that we are a water quality program, yes? As discussed, healthy soil is healthy water. And a diversity of the right mix of roots = healthy soil.

It was discussed that cost-share is currently provided for legumes; cost-share is lower for legumes because input costs are lower. Ms. Schirmacher mentioned that the program is designed for cost-share and not necessarily to cover the entire cost of a practices.

Motion to table as cost-share is already provided for legumes by Buck Tharpe, second by Alston Horne; motion carried unanimously.

Item 4C: Cost-share long-lasting soil-remediation amendments like PFAS-free biochar (see supporting documentation).

Ms. Schirmacher presented the supporting documentation. The subcommittee discussed that cost-share is not provided for other soil amendments, such as lime. It was also discussed that the related technology is still evolving, research is still being done, and many farmers do not have access to the equipment. It was discussed that the supporting documentation shows that this is already an economical, money-saving practice, so it does not need to be incentivized at this time.

Motion to table due to evolving technology and lack of consistent research by Buck Tharpe, second by Steve Jones; motion carried unanimously.

Item 5C: Consider a practice for planting native/pollinator plants on agricultural land consistent with NRCS Practice Code and Standard 327. These plantings may be done on cropland being converted perennial native plants that would address soil, water, and wildlife habitat degradation

resource concerns to meet landowner objectives. *Deferred in CY25 pending creation of a draft specification.*

Ms. Schirmacher and Mr. Talley presented a draft specification. There was discussion about whether maintenance (mowing and/or burning in accordance with NRCS 327) would be required as it is proposed to be a ten-year practice. It was discussed that the specification should include language regarding livestock being excluded. The subcommittee asked for further clarification to the “Description” section to better define what the practice is expected to accomplish and deferred further discussion until the next meeting.

Item 6C: The current Agricultural Best Management Practices (BMP) includes several important practices for the use of cover crops. The types of cover crop plants are largely based on grains, some legumes, and some brassicas. There is room for improvement. The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) organization also recommends the use of cover crops, but their recommended list of plants is more extensive than the current Ag BMPs. The enclosed table shows the differences. Also, under SARE’s manual the use of the cover crops is more diverse. The increased plant diversity has several advantages to soil enrichment. A richer diversity of a mix of cover plants reportedly can produce better soil organic matter and deeper root structures. Expand the number of cover crop plans included in the Virginia Ag BMPs based on the SARE manual. *Deferred in CY24 and 25 pending publication of data from VT.*

Ms. Schirmacher mentioned that previously discussed research has been published and Dr. Hunter Frame will be attending the next meeting of the subcommittee. The committee raised questions to ask of Dr. Frame prior to his attendance at the next meeting:

1. 60% is the coverage requirement. Are there enough growing degree days or is it feasible for these crops to reach the minimum coverage requirement within the planting/establishment deadlines?
2. Will this research change the credits in the Bay Model?

Ms. Schirmacher presented the published research and will send information to the subcommittee members to review prior to the next meeting.

Item 8C: *Two suggestions related to cover crop seeding rates:* A. For consistency, suggest edits to the Cover Crop species and rates tables related to rye species and seeding rates for all species be made consistently across all cover crop practices. There is no reason to have different seeding rates for various cover crop practices. We suggest using the same table for all practices. We suggest reviewing tables in all of the Cover Crop specifications. While not all of the Cover Crop practices offer bonus payments for Rye, it is important that the information in the tables be consistent across all related practice specifications. Currently Barley seeding rate is not consistent across all practices. There may be others that are not consistent as well. B. Reevaluate seeding rates for each planting method for all cover crop practices and ensure that the appropriate rates are being used for cover crop practices statewide. Create a required protocol to ensure existing or revised seeding rates are being used for cover crop practices.

It was discussed that requiring verification seeding rates would increase District workload and add more restriction to the practices. It was also discussed that there are different management styles and seeding rates vary within those management styles. Members pointed out that discussion last year was that pounds per acre was more accurate than bushels per acre and the language could potentially be updated to reflect that. Ms. Schirmacher mentioned that the current seeding rates are recommendations and not requirements and that the goal is to reach 60% cover.

Motion to table as these are recommended but not required seeding rates and management styles can achieve the goals of those specific specifications made by Cory Hoar, second by Buck Tharpe; motion carried unanimously.

The subcommittee broke for lunch from 12:20-1:05. Tim Talley did not return to the meeting, Matt Carroll stepped in as proxy; Spencer Yaeger did not return to the meeting. With 15 voting members present, quorum was established.

Item 7C: Add NM-7 (Cover Crop for Managing Liquid and Semi-Solid Manure) as an eligible practice in WFA. It is not fair for producers to miss a core payment for these acres and it is an inefficient use of SWCD staff time to have to manage a separate application for these acres.

There was discussion about an increase in data entry, but members felt that it would not have a significant impact.

Motion to advance adding the NM-7 practice into WFA-NM to allow producers the benefits of the practice by Kemper Marable, second by Steve Jones; motion carried unanimously.

Item 9C: Change the date listed on page 15 of the WFA-NM specification, Policies and Specifications section #8 from April 1st to May 1st to align with other specifications that were changed.

Ms. Schirmacher presented the reason for the previous date change from April 1st to May 1st was because it was requested for nitrogen only. Members discussed that this change could work for consistency across the suite of similar practices and could simplify sign-up for both Districts and participants.

Motion to advance changing the date listed on page 15 of the WFA-NM specification to be consistent with nitrogen practices by Kemper Marable, second by Trevor Guy; motion carried unanimously.

Item 10C: Consider revising the CCI-SL-1 specification to remove the requirement that the field be previously be enrolled in the SL-1 practice. There are ways to verify cropping and conversion history other than relying on SWCD practice participation records. We are potentially missing out

on creditable acres by excluding acres that were not part of an SL-1 practice. Also, this concern was also brought up and discussed during the full TAC meeting in October.

It was discussed that verification of previous voluntary conversion without an SL-1 would be a challenge and guidelines would have to be set for how far back verification would need to go; potential methods of verification were discussed (FSA and/or NRCS sign-up history). It was suggested that responsibility should be on the participant and not the District. Ms. Schirmacher will draft revised language and present it at the next meeting.

Item 11C: Recommend revising the cost share bonus payment to promote the use of Virginia grown seed. The recent data from Dr. Hunter Frame indicates there is no difference in cereal grain species in biomass and N uptake. Therefore, the incentive should be placed to increase the use of Virginia Certified/Quality Assurance (QATM), and Virginia grown seed. Virginia's small grain sector has also faced a notable decline over the past decade driven largely by a low market price. Expanding in-state seed production presents an opportunity to rebuild this market by strengthening demand and keeping more value within Virginia's agricultural economy. By incentivizing Virginia-grown seed, the program can help stabilize acreage, support local seed suppliers, and encourage a reintegration of small grains into the rotation of producers across the state.

Members expressed concern that finding seed anywhere is difficult. It was also discussed that it could result in additional work for District staff to have to verify.

Motion to table as finding seed is difficult and this could result in additional work for District staff by Buck Tharpe, second by Trevor Guy; fifteen members were in favor, none opposed, one abstention; motion carried.

Item 12C: Request that the WFANM practices be reviewed by both the Nutrient Management/Cover Crop and Programmatic Subcommittees. Our goal is to establish a clear, standardized definition of "acceptable documentation and written verification" for each practice. Currently, the specifications contain inconsistencies regarding the data required from producers. Some suggested verification examples are either irrelevant to the specific practice or lack the necessary geographic data to link the information to a specific location. Ideally, we should develop a list of relevant documentation that moves away from a reliance on invoices or bills.

The subcommittee discussed that most WFA-NM specifications rely on invoices, which may not always directly reflect what is being installed/implemented within a District as a lot of producers participate in multiple Districts. It was discussed that as-applied maps should qualify as acceptable documentation because it is a clearer representation of what work has been completed. It was suggested that a form be created for Districts to follow that lists acceptable documentation for auditors. The subcommittee deferred further discussion to the next meeting so that a list of acceptable documentation could be created.

Item 13C: Request that the NM-1A practice be reviewed by the Nutrient Management/Cover Crop and Programmatic Subcommittees. Specifically, we suggest a review of the specification language requiring an invoice from the private certified planner. We recommend removing this requirement, as the District does not pay the invoice amount set by the plan writer. Instead, payment is based strictly on the signed-up acreage, verified by FSA maps and producer confirmation of the relevant Farm, Tract, and Fields.

The subcommittee discussed that the NM-1A is a flat-rate practice and that in some cases invoices from Nutrient Management plan writers may not exactly match FSA map acreage. It was also discussed that the point of invoices is to prove that payment was made to a plan writer and no other programs were used (DCR Planner or Direct Pay Program). Members pointed out that invoices for other flat-rate practices, such as cover crop, do not require invoices.

Motion to table as the invoice for an NM-1A can be used to verify that practice is not being paid out twice by Buck Tharpe, second by Steve Jones; seven in favor, seven opposed, one abstention; motion failed.

Motion to advance as invoices may differ from actual installed acres and they create additional burden on District staff for flat-rate practices by Keith Burgess, second by Trevor Guy; eleven in favor, two opposed, two abstentions; motion carried.

Public Comment

Brandon Dillistin suggested adding to Item 12C that if a producer is implementing the practices themselves, some sort of verification documentation should be provided.

Kemper Marable raised questions about pay-for-performance cover crops and determining credit amounts in the Bay Model. Kevin Dunn provided information regarding the Bay Model giving credit in Virginia and other states for planting and for amount of cover obtained. Sara Bottenfield mentioned that this would reflect a major change beyond the scope of the TAC.

The committee reviewed the discussion, outcomes, and actions taken during the meeting.

Motion to adjourn at 2:50pm by Kemper Marable, second by Trevor Guy; motion carried unanimously.