

**Resource Management Plan Implementation
Stakeholder Advisory Group
East Reading Room, Patrick Henry Building, Richmond, Virginia
Friday, September 15, 2017**

Stakeholder Advisory Committee Members Present

Clyde Cristman, Director, Department of Conservation and Recreation
Matt Kowalski, Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Martha Moore, Virginia Farm Bureau Federation
Katie Frazier, Virginia Agribusiness Council
Adrienne Kotula, James River Association
Richard Street, Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board
Lindsay Reames, Office of the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry
Dr. Kendall Tyree, Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
Greg Wichelns, Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District
Tim Woodward, Tellus Agrinomics

DCR Staff Present

Scott Ambler, Resource Management Protection Coordinator
Michael Fletcher, Board and Constituent Services Liaison
Darryl Glover, Director, Division of Soil and Water Conservation
Wendy Howard Cooper, Business and Administration Manager
Stephanie Martin, Soil and Water Conservation District Liaison
Barbara McGarry, Resource Management Protection Plan Specialist
Christine Watlington, Senior Policy and Planning Analyst

Welcome and Introductions

Mr. Cristman called the meeting to order and welcomed attendees to the third and final meeting of the Resource Management Plan Implementation Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG). Members and staff introduced themselves.

Mr. Cristman noted that staff had prepared a draft report prior to the meeting for the SAG to review. He advised that the primary purpose of the meeting as to review the draft report with the SAG and hear any recommendations and comments the SAG had on the draft. A copy of the draft report is included at Attachment A.

Mr. Cristman noted that the purpose of the SAG was to look at ways to increase the implementation of RMPs across the state and to explore ways to encourage producers to move through the certification process. Additionally, there needs to be improvement in the manner and amount of data that is collected on best management practices voluntarily implemented by producers.

Participant Survey Results

Ms. McGarry noted that, at the last meeting, the SAG had requested that a survey of RMP producers be conducted regarding the RMP program. The intent was to look at why producers participated in the

program and what could be done to encourage them to fully implement their RMP and achieve certification.

The survey was conducted through a variety of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (Districts), geographic areas, and farm types. Districts were given a choice of contacting producers in their area directly or having the Department contact the producers. A total of twenty producers were included in the survey; eighteen producers responded.

The following seven questions were asked:

1. You have an approved RMP. What motivated you to get an RMP written?
2. Do you know who to call if you are interested in advancing to the next step in the RMP process?
3. Has your RMP developer followed up with you concerning your RMP after it was approved by the Soil and Water Conservation District?
4. Have you installed all the required BMPs in your RMP?
5. Have you applied for cost-share to implement the BMPs in your RMP?
6. If you have applied for cost-share for BMPs included in your RMP, was the cost-share approved?
7. What will be helpful to you to move your RMP to certification?

Ms. McGarry reported that in many cases the reasons for participating in the RMP program was a recommendation from the RMP developer. The established relationship between the RMP developer and the producer was a motivating factor in the producer requesting an RMP be developed. She also noted that there is some confusion on the part of the producer regarding who the producer should contact to move to the next step in the RMP process. More than half of the survey participants did not understand that process clearly.

Some producers indicated that financial incentives for plan development and certification might be helpful in encouraging them to achieve certification.

A member remarked that all producers that were surveyed had RMPs developed by private planners, not District employees. It is important to note the significance of the private-sector RMP developers statewide.

Mr. Glover reported that of the approximately 390 RMPs statewide, the vast majority have been written by two private-sector RMP developers. Because of the limited number of RMP developers and their existing workload developing RMPs, the plans have not been certified. One of the potential benefits of the Department's conservation plan program is that the increased training opportunities may increase the number of RMP developers. There are a number of District employees who wish to be certified, but cannot attend all of the required classes through the Natural Resource Conservation Service. The conservation plan program training requirements should allow District employees and private consultants to achieve the necessary trainings to be certified as RMP developers.

Mr. Glover also noted that the next RMP grant round will include requirements for assisting producers with achieving certification of their RMPs, as well as continuing to develop RMPs. Since the last meeting of the SAG there have been no new plans submitted, and one has been certified.

A member suggested that, along with the number of plans, the acreage of those plans per year be included in the draft report.

Mr. Cristman noted that the Department is looking for a way to standardize the funding priorities for RMP across the Districts. One way to accomplish this may be to include standard deduction on the Conservation Efficiency Factor (CEF) for all BMPs that are included in an RMP.

Ms. Martin noted that Districts are currently working on the Budget Template for 2018 and 2019. In that document there are sections related to the workloads associated with the approval of RMPs and for anticipated workload impacts related to inspections. Those sections ask the Districts to anticipate the amount of staff time, mileage, and other expenses associated with the Program and to provide that data into the template.

A member suggested that it would be helpful to continue educating the Districts and other partners regarding the RMP process. It was noted that the Association could work to provide additional educational tracts at upcoming meetings regarding RMPs.

The Department will continue to work on the development of an RMP brochure that clearly outlines the next steps a producer needs to take once all the BMPs are implemented in the RMP. There was support from the SAG for additional funds to be allocated to the Districts for approving and inspecting RMP plans, but not at the expense of reducing already stretched District allocations.

A member pointed out that it would be helpful to know the funding amounts needed by the Districts to adequately address the workload of the RMP program. Ms. Martin advised that the Department addresses this through the budget template process but that some Districts are challenged on how to provide the data. Some Districts don't have experience with the RMP program yet; the budget template process anticipates the needs for next year and it can be difficult to anticipate upcoming needs for a new program.

A member noted that the lack of stable and adequate funding for agricultural BMPs is an inhibiting factor. This information should be cross-referenced with the report being developed by the Water Quality Improvement Fund stabilization stakeholder advisory group.

It was recommended that the Department and stakeholders develop a joint communication plan for educational and promotional activities.

The SAG agreed that the group should be continued to further discussions and efforts related to the program.

Mr. Cristman advised that Ms. Watlington would finalize the report and submit it to members for final review. The report is due to the Governor and the General Assembly by October 1 so there would be little turnaround time for the final comments.

Mr. Cristman thanked members for attending and the meeting was adjourned.

Attachment #A

**REPORT OF THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND
RECREATION**

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE NEEDS AND
POTENTIAL INCENTIVES TO ENCOURAGE
IMPLEMENTATION OF RESOURCE
MANAGEMENT PLANS**

**TO THE GOVERNOR AND THE CHAIRMEN OF THE HOUSE
APPROPRIATIONS AND SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEES**



**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
RICHMOND
OCTOBER 2017**

Molly Joseph Ward
Secretary of Natural Resources

Clyde E. Cristman
Director



Rochelle Altholz
Deputy Director of
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David C. Dowling
Deputy Director of
Soil and Water Conservation
and Dam Safety

Thomas L. Smith
Deputy Director of Operations

COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION

DRAFT

October 1, 2017

The Honorable Terence R. McAuliffe
Governor of Virginia

The Honorable Emmett W. Hanger, Jr.
Co-Chair, Senate Finance Committee

The Honorable Thomas K. Norment, Jr.
Co-Chair, Senate Finance Committee

The Honorable Chris S. Jones
Chair, House Appropriations Committee

Dear Governor McAuliffe, Senator Hanger, Senator Norment and Delegate Jones:

I am pleased to provide this report, ***An Examination of the Needs and Potential Incentives to Encourage Implementation of Resource Management Plans***, on behalf of the Department of Conservation and Recreation.

This report is presented in accordance with the requirements established in Item 364 Q of Chapter 836 of the 2017 Acts of Assembly in which the *Director is directed to convene a stakeholder group to examine the funding, training, and resource needs, as well as explore new incentives, for additional implementation of Resource Management Plans (RMPs) pursuant to §§ 10.1-104.7 through 10.1-104.9 of the Code of Virginia.*

If you have any questions regarding this report or require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Respectfully submitted,

Clyde E. Cristman

Preface - DRAFT

This report has been prepared in accordance with the requirements established in Item 364 Q of Chapter 836 of the 2017 Acts of Assembly. The Item states "*the Director, Department of Conservation and Recreation, shall convene a stakeholder group consisting of, but not limited to, designees of the Secretary of Natural Resources, the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry, the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the Virginia Farm Bureau Federation, the Virginia Agribusiness Council, the Chesapeake Bay Commission, and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to examine the funding, training, and resource needs, as well as explore new incentives, for additional implementation of Resource Management Plans (RMPs), pursuant to §§ 10.1-104.7 through 10.1-104.9, Code of Virginia*".

The members of the stakeholder group included:

Mr. Russ Baxter, Office of the Secretary of Natural Resources

Mr. Matt Kowalski, Chesapeake Bay Foundation

Mr. Clyde Cristman, Department of Conservation and Recreation

Ms. Martha Moore, Virginia Farm Bureau Federation

Ms. Katie Frazier, Virginia Agribusiness Council

Ms. Megan Seibel, Office of the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry

Mr. Charles Green, Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

Mr. Richard Street, Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board

Ms. Leslie Anne Hinton, Three Rivers Soil and Water Conservation District

Dr. Kendall Tyree, Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Ms. Ann Jennings, Chesapeake Bay Commission

Mr. Greg Wichelns, Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District

Ms. Adrienne Kotula, James River Association

Mr. Tim Woodward, Tellus Agronomics

The Department would like to thank all the members of the stakeholder group for their insight and contributions to this report.

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Executive Summary – IN PROGRESS - DRAFT

Item 364 Q of the 2017 Acts of Assembly directed the Director of the Department of Conservation and Recreation to establish a stakeholder group "to examine the funding, training, and resource needs, as well as explore new incentives, for additional implementation of Resource Management Plans (RMPs), pursuant to §§10.1-104.7 through 10.1-104.9, Code of Virginia".

1. History of the Resource Management Plan Program

During the 2011 General Assembly Session, then-Delegate Edward Scott introduced legislation (Chapter 781, 2011 Acts of Assembly) establishing the resource management plan (RMP) Program. The legislation recognized the significant efforts of agricultural producers to be good stewards of their lands. The Program encourages producers to voluntarily install agricultural best management practices (BMPs); in return, the producers are provided a degree of certainty from additional BMP installation requirements for a period of nine years.

In June 2011, the Department of Conservation and Recreation (Department), on behalf of the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board (Board), convened a regulatory advisory panel to assist in the development of regulations. Between June 2011 and February 2012, the panel met five times and the panel's subcommittees met six times.

The Board proposed regulations on March 29, 2012. After a public comment period, final regulations were adopted by the Board on March 27, 2013. The regulations became effective on July 1, 2014.

2. Requirements of the Program

Chapter 781 established many of the programmatic requirements of the RMP Program while calling for the regulations to "be technically achievable and to take into account the economic impact to the agricultural owner or operator". The regulations (4VAC50-70) were also mandated to contain provisions related to:

- minimum standards of an RMP pursuant to §10.1-104.8;
- processes for the development and approval of an RMP;
- methods to ensure and verify the full implementation of an RMP;
- qualifications necessary for an RMP plan developer; and
- a requirement for an individual onsite farm assessment to be conducted.

RMP Fundamentals

- The RMP Program is completely voluntary; an agricultural producer is able to opt out of the Program at any time without penalty.
- An RMP may be developed for either an agricultural owner or an operator.
- RMPs may be developed for any land management unit whether the unit is a single field, tract, farm, or the entire agricultural operation.
- An RMP includes a list of all existing BMPs on the land management unit, a list of all recommended and required BMPs, and the schedule of implementation as agreed to by the producer.

- A producer that has fully implemented an RMP receives a "Certificate of Implementation". Once a Certificate is received, the producer is deemed to be in full compliance with:
 - any total maximum daily load (TMDL) for nutrients, sediments, benthic, or bacteria;
 - the Chesapeake Bay TMDL Watershed Implementation Plan; and
 - state water quality requirements for nutrients and sediment.

RMP Minimum Standards

Section 10.1-104.8 of the Code of Virginia and the Resource Management Plan regulations (4VAC50-70) establish certain minimum standards for BMP implementation depending on the type of farm operation. The three types of operation specifically mentioned are: cropland (including specialty crops), hayland, and pasture.

Type of Farm Operation	BMP Requirements
Cropland	A nutrient management plan (NMP) that meets Department standards
	A forest or grass buffer that is a minimum of 35 feet along all perennial streams
	A soil conservation plan that achieves a maximum soil loss of "T" as defined by the Natural Resources Conservation Service
	Cover crops meeting BMP specifications where needed for the NMP or to meet "T"
Hayland	A nutrient management plan that meets Department standards
	A forest or grass buffer that is a minimum of 35 feet along all perennial streams
	A soil conservation plan that achieves a maximum soil loss of "T" as defined by the Natural Resources Conservation Service
Pasture	A nutrient management plan that meets Department standards
	A system that limits or prevents livestock access to perennial streams
	A pasture management plan or soil conservation plan that achieves a maximum soil loss of "T" as defined by the Natural Resources Conservation Service

RMP Process

There are five distinct stages in the RMP process: (1) farm assessment, (2) plan development, (3) plan implementation, (4) verification, and (5) certification. A producer is able to begin the RMP process by requesting an RMP be developed by a certified RMP developer or by requesting this service at their local soil and water conservation district (District). The District will also be able to provide information on potential financial assistance options available through the Virginia Agricultural Cost-Share Program (VACS).

Stage 1: Farm Assessment

A certified RMP developer visits the farming operation and conducts an onsite assessment for the land unit that will be covered by the RMP. The developer gathers basic information including the location and description of the land unit, the type of agricultural operation, water features, any environmental concerns, and any existing BMPs.

Stage 2: Plan Development

Based on the knowledge gained from the onsite assessment, the plan developer will create an RMP for the land unit. The RMP includes a list of existing BMPs, a list of required BMPs, and a BMP implementation schedule. The plan developer may include additional BMPs, beyond those BMPs specifically required, that may be beneficial to the agricultural operation. Once an RMP is developed and the producer approves the BMP implementation schedule, the RMP is submitted for approval to either the local District or the Department. Districts have established Technical Review Committees (TRCs) to review RMPs prior to approval. The Department reviews and approves RMPs only if the District has developed the RMP. To date, all RMPs have been reviewed by the Districts.

Stage 3: Plan Implementation

Once an RMP is approved, the producer installs and implements the BMPs required in the RMP. The practices in an RMP may be eligible for cost-share funding through the VACS program.

Stage 4: Verification

When all the required BMPs have been installed or implemented, the producer requests a verification inspection by the plan developer and the District. Upon verification that the RMP is fully implemented, the local District board affirms the adequacy and implementation of the RMP and submits the required documentation to the Department.

Stage 5: Certification

The Department issues a Certificate of Implementation which is valid for nine years from the date of issuance. Inspections are conducted at least once every three years throughout the nine-year certainty period to ensure the proper functioning and maintenance of all required BMPs.

3. Highlights of the Program

The RMP Program is a relatively new program, with only three years of active implementation. More than 92,000 acres throughout the Commonwealth are currently included in RMPs. The majority of RMPs developed are located within the Chesapeake Bay watershed; however, there has also been some interest in RMPs being developed outside of that watershed. Producers are installing and implementing BMPs contained in the RMP and are moving through the RMP stages towards certification.

RMP Statistics

As of August 31, 2017, there are 388 RMPs, covering over 92,000 acres, of which:

- 50 are in the development or assessment stage;
- 323 have been approved by Districts;
- 15 are under review by Districts;

Of these 388 RMPs:

- 4 are awaiting certification inspections; and
- 10 have been fully implemented and are certified.

Three hundred and sixty-one (361) plans have been developed for seventy four producers in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Twelve participants have requested twenty-nine plans in areas outside of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Six participants have eight plans that are in both watersheds.

RMPs by Land Types

The vast majority of RMPs have been developed for cropland but there have been RMPs developed for other types of agricultural lands.

Agricultural Land Type	Acres in RMPs
Cropland	76,875
Hayland	4,102
Pasture	8,099
Hayland and pasture	1,313
Cropland, hayland, and pasture	358
Cropland and hayland	1,192
Cropland and pasture	77
Total	92,016

BMPs Included in RMPs

There are numerous BMPs included in each RMP. Some of the BMPs included may be eligible for VACS funding (cost-share); other BMPs may be implemented at solely the producer's expense (voluntary). Verifying voluntary BMPs and reporting those BMPs to the Chesapeake Bay Program to demonstrate the Commonwealth's continued progress towards meeting the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Implementation Plan goals is a critical benefit of this Program. The table below shows the BMPs that are currently

implemented versus the BMPs that are included in an RMP but have not yet been verified as implemented.

BMP (cost-share vs. voluntary)	Total
Cost-share complete	307
Cost-share proposed	779
Subtotal	1,086
Voluntary complete	4
Voluntary proposed	1,438
Subtotal	1,442
Total	2,528

RMPs by Locality

The majority of RMPs have been developed in the Northern Piedmont and Eastern regions of the Commonwealth. Between November 2015 and October 2016, the Program expanded into 10 counties that previously had no RMPs and into areas of the state outside of the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Number of RMPs (range)	Locality (County)	Soil and Water Conservation District
More than 21	Albemarle	Thomas Jefferson
	Culpeper	Culpeper
	Fauquier	John Marshall
	Hanover	Hanover-Caroline
	Henrico	Henricopolis
	Northumberland	Northern Neck
	Orange	Culpeper
11-20	Caroline	Hanover-Caroline
	Fluvanna	Thomas Jefferson
	Madison	Culpeper
	Northampton	Eastern Shore
6-10	Augusta	Headwaters
	King and Queen	Three Rivers
	Lancaster	Northern Neck
	Powhatan	Monacan
	Westmoreland	Northern Neck
1-5	Accomack	Eastern Shore
	Amelia	Piedmont
	Appomattox	Robert E. Lee
	Brunswick	Lake Country

	Buckingham	Peter Francisco
	Charles City	Colonial
	Chesterfield	James River
	Clarke	Lord Fairfax
	Cumberland	Peter Francisco
	Dinwiddie	Appomattox River
	Essex	Three Rivers
	Gloucester	Tidewater
	Goochland	Monacan
	Isle of Wight	Peanut
	King George	Tri-County/City
	King William	Three Rivers
	Loudoun	Loudoun
	Louisa	Thomas Jefferson
	Lunenburg	Southside
	Middlesex	Tidewater
	New Kent	Colonial
	Nottoway	Piedmont
	Prince George	James River
	Prince William	Prince William
	Rappahannock	Culpeper
	Richmond	Northern Neck
	Rockbridge	Natural Bridge
	Rockingham	Shenandoah Valley
	Southampton	Chowan Basin
	Spotsylvania	Tri-County/City
	Stafford	Tri-County/City
	Sussex	Chowan Basin
	Warren	Lord Fairfax

4. Current RMP Incentives and Opportunities

The Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board (Board) and the Department have established several financial assistance incentives and other opportunities related to the RMP program.

Virginia Agricultural Cost-Share Program (VACS) Funding Incentives

The Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board has approved two cost-share funding incentives related to the RMP program, RMP-1 and RMP-2.

RMP -1

This practice assists producers with the costs related to the actual development of an RMP. Funding is provided at \$10.00 per acre with a total maximum funding amount of \$6,500 per plan. If a producer so chooses, payment may be made directly to the RMP developer. To date, nearly \$117,554 has been disbursed for RMP-1 payments; an additional \$17,826 in payments is pending.

RMP-2

In recognition of the financial investment by the producer in fully implementing the RMP, the practice provides \$5.00 per acre with a total maximum funding amount of \$3,250 per plan. Once a producer has received a Certificate of Implementation, he is eligible to apply for RMP-2. Nearly \$9,334 has been disbursed for RMP-2 payments to date. These payments are expected to grow considerably throughout FY2018.

Financial Incentives for Plan Developers

The Department has leveraged federal grant monies from the U.S. Environment Protection Agency to directly contract with RMP plan developers in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Approximately \$584,000 has been paid to the RMP plan developers for the development of RMPs in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. An additional \$120,000 of these federal funds has been allocated for contracts with the developers through May 31, 2018. For areas outside of the Chesapeake Bay watershed, the Department has utilized nearly \$94,000 in Water Quality Improvement funds to contract with plan developers. These contracts have led to the development of most of the RMPs across the Commonwealth.

Virginia Agricultural Cost-Share Program (VACS) Policies

Priority Consideration

The Board recognizes the critical role the RMP Program plays in meeting the Commonwealth's water quality goals. In administering VACS, the Board has determined that producers with an RMP should receive one of the priority considerations for cost-share funding, as reflected by language in the VACS BMP Manual. Priority considerations must be used by the Districts to qualify cost-share applications; if a cost-share application does not meet at least one of the priority considerations, the BMP in the application should not be funded.

Secondary Consideration

In addition to the primary considerations established by the Board, Districts also use secondary considerations to determine funding priority for cost-share applications. Secondary considerations address local water quality concerns and are determined by each SWCD; these considerations are

reviewed and approved by the Department. Several Districts include RMP implementation as a secondary consideration; the Department encourages this practice.

5. RMP Implementation

The RMP Program has been remarkably successful in encouraging the development of RMPs. However, there is concern about the limited number of RMPs that have received a Certificate of Implementation. To date, ten RMPs have been certified.

Key RMP Timeframes

Based on a review of certified RMPs, the RMP process (from RMP development to certification) took an average of seven quarters (614 days). There was an average of five quarters between RMP approval and certification. Between RMP development and RMP certification, there are typically revisions made to an RMP by the plan developer in response to concerns or questions raised by the District. However, once those revisions are made, the Districts move quickly on approvals which usually occur within one month of final RMP submittal.

Fiscal Year	Number Submitted	Number Approved	Number Certified
July 1, 2014 – June 30, 2015	72	3	1
July 1, 2015 – June 30, 2016	237	280	0
July 1, 2016 – June 30, 2017	53	24	8
July 1, 2017 – August 31, 2017	0	16	1
Total	362	323	10

Based on the timeframes shown above, it does appear that delays are occurring at the implementation stage.

Survey

At the request of the stakeholder advisory group, the Department and several Districts surveyed 20 producers with RMPs that have not yet been certified. The producers represent a variety of Districts (11), agricultural operations (crop, hay, or pasture), and RMP plan developers. Only producers that have had ample time to implement an approved RMP, as determined by reviewing the BMP implementation schedule, were surveyed. Producers with

plans that had been approved in the last three quarters were not surveyed. Efforts were made to represent several types of farm operations and a variety of Districts.

Districts were given the option to contact the producer within their area directly or for the Department to contact the producer. Of the 20 selected producers, Districts requested that six be contacted by the Department. Responses were received from 18 producers.

The survey questions asked producers what was necessary for them to fully implement their RMP. The need for additional details regarding the RMP process after an RMP was developed was a common response. A point of confusion among producers seems to be who to contact to request certification once the RMP is fully implemented. Increased communication and consistent information needs to be provided by the plan developer, the District, and the Department. Responses also indicated that additional financial incentives for RMP development, implementation, and certification, including additional considerations for VACS cost-share funding, would be helpful to producers working to achieve RMP certification.

6. Department Initiatives

The Department has begun several initiatives focusing on increased implementation of RMPs.

RMP Implementation and Development Funding for FY2018

The Department is continuing to strongly encourage Districts to sign-up producers for the RMP-1 (plan development) and RMP-2 (available upon RMP certification) practices. Districts have also been asked to develop a list of producers that have implemented RMPs and need assistance completing the certification process.

For FY 2018, an RMP-1 sign-up period and a new procedure to prioritize RMPs for funding may be utilized by the Districts. The Department developed the prioritization at the request of several Districts and considers the amount of farm participation (whole farm, tract, or field), stream or river proximity, highly erodible land (HEL) acreage, watershed degradation (HUC ranking), and bacteria or nutrient impairment.

Emphasis will be placed on funding the RMP-2 practices until the end of the calendar year 2017. After January 1, 2018, the Department will utilize the information provided by the Districts to determine how federal grant funds and any remaining state funding would be best used to promote RMP certification, and development. Federal funds may be applied to new contracts with RMP developers in 2018 to both develop new RMPs and to advance existing RMPs to certification. Any remaining state funds may be for RMP-1. The Department will continue to disburse payments for any RMP-2 requested as long as funds are available.

The Department also continues to encourage Districts to notify their producers of funding opportunities such as VACS cost-share that may help implement or install BMPs that are in approved RMPs.

Future Grant Proposals

A majority of the RMPs developed has been as a result of the grant-funded contracts offered by the Department to RMP plan developers. These contracts are funded through either federal monies or funds from the Water Quality Improvement Fund. Currently, these contracts only focus on RMP development. However, beginning in June 2018 (the next grant cycle), the Department plans to contract RMP developers to also assist producers with the RMP verification and certification process.

RMP Verification Pilot Project

One of the potential elements that delays the certification of an RMP is the need for an inspection by both the plan developer and the District. It may be possible for the Department to facilitate the necessary verification inspections by coordinating with both the plan developer and District. If the inspections occurred simultaneously, the verification inspection review times could be shortened. If the Department participated in the inspection process as well, voluntary practices could be verified and reported to the Chesapeake Bay Program. This would increase the amount of reportable BMP data.

Increase the Number of Plan Developers

There are currently a very limited number of active plan developers; increasing the number of developers could lead to additional RMPs being developed throughout the Commonwealth. The Board has directed the Department to establish a Virginia-focused conservation planning and certification program. Increased availability of conservation planning and certification should lead to an increased number of RMP plan developers, especially among persons who already possess nutrient management plan certification. As gaining the additional required knowledge and skills necessary to become an RMP developer is becoming increasingly difficult in Virginia, the development of this Virginia-focused program should allow more individuals to achieve the necessary qualifications.

7. Recommendations

The Department recognizes the importance of this Program in achieving the Commonwealth's water quality goals. While the Program is making remarkable strides, the Department also recognizes there are several action items that could make the Program more successful.

Focus on Education

Survey results identified the need for increased educational efforts related to the RMP process, specifically the process after an RMP is developed, and more generally on the benefits of receiving certification under the Program. Continuing to increase producer knowledge of the Program and its associated benefits must be a priority. Utilizing occasions, such as annual meetings and key outreach events, convened by partner agricultural organizations, government agencies, and other stakeholders could expand interest in and understanding about the Program beyond its current boundaries. The Department should work with all of its partners to ensure information provided to producers is accurate, complete, helpful, and relevant.

The Virginia Farm Bureau Federation, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and the Department have discussed potential marketing strategies that could be used to increase awareness of the RMP Program. As a result of those discussions, the Department has designed a new logo for the Program and producers with a certified RMP may purchase a sign with the logo. If the producer chooses, a Virginia Grown sign could be attached to the RMP sign.

Financial Initiatives

The Board and the Department should review the incentives that are currently offered to encourage participation in the RMP Program and strongly consider the following:

- Requesting Districts establish RMP-2 (certification) waiting lists;
- Utilizing a portion of annual grant funds for RMP-2 based on waiting lists;
- Increasing the funding amount paid to a producer under the RMP-2 practice and increasing the maximum funding amount allowed;
- Exploring a cost-share practice that provides funding, every three years, for a producer at each inspection after initial certification is achieved; and
- Creating a cost-share practice that funds the continued implementation of practices that are voluntarily installed or implemented by a producer.

Administrative Action Items

The Board and the Department should review the current program requirements for any potential administrative efficiencies. Based on the results of the Department's pilot efforts to assist Districts with RMP verification inspections, the roles of the plan developer, District, and the Department could potentially be clarified, or amended, to streamline the verification inspection process.

Partner Initiatives

Broader participation (including agenda topics) by the RMP program at the major agricultural association events would increase RMP name recognition and possibly increase RMP implementation.