



Agriculture: We're Half Way There

Buff Showalter

Keeping livestock out of streams has proven herd health benefits. It is also a clear sign to downstream neighbors and other community members of your ethics and environmental stewardship.

Try these options to keep cattle healthy by keeping them out of streams:

- Off-stream watering systems
- Stream fencing
- Stream crossings
- Buffer strips
- Rotational Grazing

Both the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the state agricultural best management cost-share programs can help cover expenses for certain livestock stream exclusion projects that are built to specification.

This is one in a series of articles about farmers in the Chesapeake Bay watershed who have implemented conservation practices to improve farm operations and water quality in nearby streams, demonstrating how agriculture has achieved half of the nutrient reductions necessary to clean up local streams and the Chesapeake Bay.

The author, Robert Whitescarver, lives in Swoope, Virginia, and can be contacted at bobby.whitescarver@gettingmoreontheground.com.

Dayton, Va. – “We’ve done two very important things on this farm that have helped with production and the environment: Keeping the soil on the land and out of the river is number one, and number two is keeping our cows out of the streams,” said Buff Showalter, fourth generation Mennonite farmer in the Shenandoah Valley.

Building soil health is high on Showalter’s priority list. High-diversity cover crops and little if any soil disturbance helps him average 3.8 to 4.0 percent organic matter.

“That’s huge,” said Virginia Natural Resources Conservation Service State Agronomist Chris Lawrence. “Soil organic matter is a good barometer for measuring soil health.” He added, “As soil health improves, crop yields increase. Likewise as soil health improves, the soil is better able to perform its key environmental function—absorbing rain and cycling nutrients for plant use. The overall result is less runoff and less sediment and fewer nutrients downstream.”

Showalter fenced his cattle out of the streams years ago for several reasons.

“Floods kept washing our fences out, and we had foot problems with our cows. Common sense and science has proven that cows in the stream are not good for water quality or for your cows.

“Our farm is in the Lower Dry River watershed, and we’ve come a long way in five years. Farmers in this watershed are putting in a lot of conservation because we want to de-list the stream from the state’s dirty water’s list. It’s good for our water and good for our land as well.”

Showalter has participated in many of the programs available to farmers that help with technical assistance and fund best management practices to build soil health, improve water quality, and establish wildlife habitat.

To find out more, contact your local Soil and Water Conservation District or the Natural Resources Conservation Service.



Buff Showalter standing in front of recently cut “Marshall” ryegrass in the foreground and barley in the background; both excellent cover crops.