



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

Saving a National Treasure

FACT SHEET

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AGRICULTURE: WE'RE HALF WAY THERE

Marli Hickin



Greenville, VA: Widowed with five children, Marli Hickin wondered what do with the family farm. While she could continue to let the neighboring dairy use it, she decided instead to farm the land herself with help from her children. It has since become a teaching tool for the kids and conservation model.

Her farm is located at the uppermost reaches of an unnamed tributary of Broadhead Creek, which flows into the South River, part of the Shenandoah River watershed. Springs just bubble up out of the ground in many places. But the neighbor's cows had access to all of

them, creating multiple pits of muck and manure.

"I felt that since our farm was at the beginning of the creek, it was our responsibility to make sure it was a good beginning," Marli explained. "I homeschool the kids and I thought, 'What better way to teach sustainability, water quality, and ecology than beginning with the water on our own farm?'"

She decided to enroll in the USDA's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). This allowed her to drill a well to provide water for livestock, install fences to keep livestock out of the springs and streams and to create more fields to graze, and plant native trees and shrubs to improve water quality and create wildlife habitat.

Conservation planners, private contractors, along with federal and state funding, helped create a rotational grazing system for the farm that now has six livestock watering stations and seven grazing units.

Marli's son Bo explained that the property is now an outdoors classroom. "The farm makes it easy to learn about biology, genetics, physics, ecology, anatomy and math," he said.

"The kids have learned more on our land than I ever learned in my genetics and anatomy classes in college," Marli said. "It's a remarkable experience."

The Hickins raise livestock and plan to have bees as well. They selected native trees that would attract pollinators such as paw-paw, American plum, and serviceberry. They also planted wildflowers in the CREP area.

Marli's 14-year-old daughter Lily is eager to see the native plants and trees grow. "I can't wait to climb all the fruit trees," she said.

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

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Farm Service Agency (FSA), and the Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) each have agricultural best management cost-share programs that can help cover expenses for certain livestock stream exclusion projects that are built to specification.

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This is one in a series of articles about farmers 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.

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