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There has never been a better time to fence cattle out of streams



GUEST COLUMN

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📷 Cattle in the Middle River in Augusta County. (Bobby Whitescarver)

By Bobby Whitescarver

My wife and I are beef cattle farmers in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.

Two years ago, we enrolled in Virginia's Agricultural Best Management Practice Cost-Share Program. We used this state funding to fence our cattle out of the streams and develop a rotational grazing system. The program opened a huge door of opportunity for us to get water for our cows to parts of the farm that didn't have any.

There has never been a better time to fence cattle out of streams. Virginia this year provided a record amount of funding for its agricultural cost-share and related

programs, totaling more than \$280 million over the next two years. On the federal level, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is also receiving historic levels of investment in farm conservation practices. Private non-profit organizations are helping with funding and technical assistance as well.

In addition to benefiting farmers and cattle, these programs also prevent pollution to waterways from the Shenandoah River to the Chesapeake Bay. People downstream want clean water, and they are willing to pay for it through these robust programs.

Before we enrolled in Virginia's cost-share program, our cows had one source of water: a creek on the north side of the farm. This meant we couldn't make full use of our land. The cattle stayed near the creek to drink and were reluctant to walk almost a mile to graze on the south side of the farm.

We have a cow/calf operation, and we didn't want our cows calving near the creek. Steep banks and wetlands are dangerous places for newborn calves to learn how to nurse.

Under the state program, conservation specialists helped us design a system of six watering stations strategically located throughout the farm.

We installed a mile of fencing to exclude our cows from the creek, a mile of internal fences to facilitate rotational grazing and a mile of underground pipeline that feeds water under pressure from a well to the six new watering stations.

It was a huge endeavor for us, but we got a lot of help. We were reimbursed more than 100% of the costs through three programs that provided the funds and technical assistance such as engineering designs and site inspections during construction.

The internal fencing and watering troughs help us to be more efficient and profitable farmers. We prefer to rotate our cattle to new pastures, but previously we didn't have water for the cows where we needed it. The internal fencing was designed to not only rotate the cows to new pastures, but also help us get the cows into the barnyard when we need to work them.

Why do farmers fence their cows out of streams?

The number one reason is to get more abundant clean water for their cows distributed throughout the farm.

The number two reason is to exclude cows from calving risk areas like steep banks along creeks and wetlands. That exclusion fence is good insurance against a dead calf.

The number three reason is to improve herd health. If the herd drinks out of streams, the farmer's biosecurity program to prevent diseases and infections is only as good as the worst farm upstream. At least [50% of all cattle ailments in the Mid-Atlantic states are transmitted through the fecal-oral pathway](#). If an infected cow defecates in the water upstream, the cows downstream could drink contaminated water.

The number four reason: well-designed fences make it easier to get the cows into the barnyard.

There are more reasons, but the bottom line is that it's the right thing to do because cattle destroy streams and pollute the water.

It's all voluntary now. But come July 1, 2026, Virginia's bovine bill ([HB 1422](#)) could mandate that any farm with 20 cows or more must exclude them from all perennial streams. This trigger law only goes into effect if the Chesapeake Bay cleanup goals have not been achieved.

Livestock exclusion from streams is one of the most popular and cost-effective best management practices in Virginia. Right now, funding and technical assistance are at historic levels. To learn more or to sign up, contact your local Soil and Water Conservation District or your local USDA field office.

Bobby Whitescarver is a cattle farmer and retired soil conservationist with the USDA. He can be reached through his website at www.gettingmoreontheground.com.

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