

Virginia CSP Champions

Keeping Conservation in the Family



Collaboration key to Augusta dairy's stewardship success

Big Rock Dairy is situated on 350 acres of prime farmland in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley. There, you will find panoramic views of both the Allegheny and Blue Ridge mountains, beef and dairy cows, a growing poultry operation, corn and alfalfa crops, and even a cave where past generations of landowners once stored milk.

Lee Simmons runs the operation with his three sons, Evan (22), Tanner (21) and Payton (18). The four men represent the fifth and sixth generations on the farm and are no strangers to USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Simmons' father got involved with the agency in 1984, when NRCS helped to fund liquid manure systems for the property through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

When Lee took over operations in 1999, he worked with Verona District Conservationist Bobby Whitescarver and then Area Resource Conservationist Chuck Cummings to continue the family's stewardship journey. He then collaborated with current District Conservationist Charlie Ivins to refine his conservation practices through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

With financial and technical assistance from CSP, Simmons has over-seeded clover in his pastures and implemented reduced tillage, multi-species cover crops and nutrient management for the different types of wastes on the farm.

"Charlie and Chuck brought it [soil health] to my attention," Simmons recounts. "Chuck said, 'Your soil quality will improve if you keep doing these practices,' and it has – big time."



Lee Simmons shares how his pack barn contributes to herd health and cow comfort as well as nutrient management on his farm.

You won't see commercial fertilizer being used here because the Simmonses rely on poultry litter, bed pack, dry stack and liquid manure for supplemental nutrients. This management approach presents a challenge for producers who must determine the type, timing and locations for proper fertilization.

CSP helps address these concerns by funding pre-sidedress soil nitrate testing (PSNT) and other nutrient management practices. Running PSNT every spring helps the Simmonses apply nutrients based on the nitrate values in their soils.

Lee Simmons is seeing significant changes on his land after implementing conservation practices through EQIP and CSP. A muddy pasture is now a bountiful cornfield providing supplemental feed for his cattle. Instead of struggling through knee-deep mud in the pasture, calves now feed

with dry cows in a bedded pack barn constructed with financial assistance from NRCS. Additionally, manure that once went straight into a nearby creek is being used to fertilize corn.

Simmons says cattle health has improved, organic matter has increased in his soils and he gets more yield-per-acre on his cornfields since he began working with NRCS. The water in his creek is also cleaner with the installation and use of loafing lots.

“NRCS has been great to work with,” Simmons describes. “With these practices, I think the quality of the water that runs through this farm has improved by keeping cattle out of the streams. I see a whole lot more organic matter and think the soil quality is going to improve a whole lot with that.”

He hopes Evan, Tanner and Payton continue to work with NRCS in the years to come. The three young men stay involved in farm logistics and assisting their father to make big decisions. The family also has plans to expand their poultry operation to a neighboring property.

“They’re good help, that’s for sure,” says Simmons. “I guess I’m very fortunate that they want to stay in it. I think they’re learning a lot as they see the benefits of the production we get out of the crops and barley.”

To learn more about CSP and other NRCS programs, visit www.va.nrcs.usda.gov/ or call your local field office.

Top right: Verona District Conservationist Charlie Ivins (left) and Jeff Cline confer with Lee Simmons and his son Tanner in their cornfield. Cline, an environmental specialist with the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, conducts PSNT testing to help the Simmons family better manage nutrient applications at Big Rock Dairy.

Middle right: Located in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley, Big Rock Dairy offers panoramic views of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Bottom right: Tanner, Evan and Payton Simmons take a break from feeding the dairy cows.

