

Installment 10 of 12: *An update on funding sources*

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Way back in February I discussed how the purchase of conservation easements are funded. The Berkeley County Farmland Protection Board usually seeks matching funds when we purchase a conservation easement since this helps stretch our public monies. Most of the outside funding agencies match our local dollars on a one to one basis, so this approach basically doubles our buying power. When I discussed funding in February some new programs had not started up yet so this is a good opportunity to update everyone on the current programs. Two programs are federal and come from the current Farm Bill. Although each is a USDA program, the focus on important conservation values differs enough that it's worth spending some time outlining each of them. A new, third funding program comes from the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection and focuses on conservation values that are different from the USDA programs.

One of the USDA funding sources is the Agricultural Land Easement, or ALE program. I've discussed this one before as it is the program that has funded more than 50% of our easements. This is the classic farmland protection program and it focuses on large properties on high quality soil. Properties under agricultural production (commodity crops, beef or dairy operations, hay and pasture) are ranked higher than properties not in full production. The deadline for applications for ALE is usually sometime in December, and this program usually has \$1 million in matching funds. ALE is very competitive and our board vies with up to 17 other WV counties for matching monies.

The other USDA program is new and goes under the name Regional Conservation Partnership Program, or RCPP. This program is funded for a minimum of two years (we are hoping for a third year extension!) and focuses on conservation efforts that protect the waters of the Potomac River and ultimately the Chesapeake Bay. There are only 8 WV counties in the Potomac River drainage area and this program, like ALE, has roughly \$1 million to match for each year. This smaller focus area should benefit our local efforts greatly. RCPP focuses on properties with creek or river frontage, with springs and wetlands, caves and sinkholes, and land atop karst or limestone. The deadline for RCPP applications for the first year funding is September 1. Both RCPP and ALE are limited to properties with less than 66% forest cover – that's a limitation from the Farm Bill and cannot be overridden.

Lastly, we have a grant from the WV Department of Environmental Protection (in conjunction with the WV Conservation Agency) to help protect the waters of Back Creek. This is a very specific funding program and applicant properties must be within the watershed of Back Creek (basically from the western side of North Mountain to the eastern slope of Sleepy Creek Mountain. The funding for this program is much less than that of the USDA programs, and we figure we should be able to place about 100 acres under conservation easements at a cost of roughly \$2,000 per acre. That cost is a bit lower than how conservation easements have been appraising in the eastern portion of the county but property values in Back Creek tend to be lower and we are expecting that the selected properties will include land that is in the flood plain and that always lowers property value. The properties that will rank highest in this program will have frontage on Back Creek or its tributaries, or have wetlands or unique environments. Unlike the two USDA programs, this program does not have a forest cover limitation. The deadline for applications for the first of two years for the Back Creek watershed program is September 15th.

So these new programs should bring additional money into the county and assist the Berkeley County Farmland Protection Board in the purchase of additional acreage of conservation easement. The ultimate goal is to help protect agriculture and the splendid natural resources which make this county such a great place to live.

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