



We work with the people who work the land.

Natural Bridge Soil and Water Conservation District Annual Report 2024-25

The Natural Bridge Soil and Water Conservation District was formed in 1939 and is the fourth oldest district in the state. In the Fall of 2025, the district will celebrate its 86th Anniversary of service to the citizens of Rockbridge County. The Natural Bridge SWCD joins 47 other Soil and Water Conservation Districts across the state of Virginia, and similar districts nationwide.

A soil and water conservation district is a governmental subdivision of the state which is responsible for conservation work within its boundaries. The purpose of this subdivision is to focus attention on land, water, and related resource problems. Soil and Water Conservation Districts enlist and coordinate help from public and private sources to deal with local conservation issues and provide technical expertise to assist the community in protecting its natural resources.

The purpose of the SWCD is to give citizens the structure and the capability to solve conservation problems at a local grassroots level. The idea of forming local conservation districts grew out of public concern for the conditions of our Natural Resources in the early 1930's. Poor farming practices, abuse of farmland, and unusually harsh weather caused massive soil erosion. The incentive for such problem solving began with the Dust Bowl/Depression era when people began to realize that land and water were precious resources to be carefully managed.

The Natural Bridge Soil and Water Conservation District was formed in 1939 and included the two magisterial districts of Botetourt and Rockbridge County. Later the city of Buena Vista joined the district. In July 1987, district boundaries were realigned. At that time the city of Lexington became part of the district. The present Natural

Bridge district includes Rockbridge County, the city of Buena Vista and the city of Lexington.

The Natural Bridge District covers over 605 square miles (approximately 387,324 acres), and includes Rockbridge County and the Cities of Lexington and Buena Vista. The District is flanked by the Alleghany Mountains on the west, and the Blue Ridge Mountains on the east. The county of Rockbridge is located midway in the Shenandoah Valley of Western Virginia and is accessible by interstate highways 81 and 64.

Natural Bridge SWCD Mission Statement

To represent the public providing local leadership in the conservation of natural resources.

Natural Bridge Vision Statement

To be a productive and cooperative entity meeting the conservation needs of our district, acting in harmony with the environment.

Board of Directors

The Natural Bridge Soil and Water Conservation District is governed by an eight-member Board of Directors, six of whom are elected in the November general election and two are appointed, one at-large and one who is the County Extension Agent. Appointed by the Board are Associate Directors, respected in their fields of natural resources, agriculture or business. All directors serve the District as volunteers.

Rob Deyo, Chairman, Representing the City of Buena Vista.

Herbie Huffman, Vice-Chair, Representing the City of Buena Vista.

Charles Winder, Treasurer, Representing the City of Lexington.

Billy Grose, Representing the City of Lexington.

Tim Goodbar, Representing the County of Rockbridge.

Charles L. Cummings, III Representing the County of Rockbridge.

Robbie Beard, Appointed Director At-Large.

Thomas A. Stanley, Appointed Director, VCE.

Associate Directors

Brian Jenkins

Larry Hurd

The Public is Welcome to Board Meetings

The District conducts monthly board meetings which are held on the third Wednesday at 6:30 p.m. SWCD meetings are open to the general public at the USDA Lexington Service Center at 40 Magnolia Square Way, Lexington. In addition, according to the electronic guidelines remote participation policy, directors are able to join the

meeting via ZOOM, as necessary, or in person in the USDA Lexington Conference Room.

Annual Report

The annual report serves as a general information and reference document regarding District operations and activities for the fiscal year '24-25.

District Office Location:

Located in the USDA Lexington Service Center, along with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Farm Service Agency, USDA.

Directions to USDA Lexington Service Center Magnolia Square, Lexington. Headed north on Route 11 from the stoplight at the East Lexington Bridge, mileage is .15 miles. Take a right to Magnolia Square. Office is located in the back building to the right and behind the main building.

Mailing and Delivery Address:

40 Magnolia Square Way, Suite 5

Lexington, Virginia 24450

Phone: (540) 319-6453

District Personnel

Robert Hickman

Conservation Specialist & District Manager

robert.hickman@vaswcd.org

Buzzy Reese

Conservation Technician

buzzy.reese@vaswcd.org

Jennifer Huffman

Office Administrator

jennifer.huffman@vaswcd.org

Margaret Spencer

Administrative Assistant, Part-Time

margaret.spencer@vaswcd.org

Natural Resources Conservation Service, USDA

USDA Lexington Service Center

Dorian Perez, District Conservationist

Robert "Gus" Wilkinson, Soil Conservationist

Hannah Sawyer, Soil Conservationist

Agency Partners

-Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR): (540) 332-9991; Staunton
-USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): (540) 319-6462; Lexington
-USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA): (540) 463-7124; Lexington
-Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE): (540) 463-4734; Lexington
-Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF): (540) 682-0242; Rockbridge contact

-Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) formerly DGIF: (804) 367-1000
-US Forest Service (USFS): (540) 291-2188; Natural Bridge Station Office
-Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ): (540) 574-7800; Harrisonburg Office
-Shenandoah Valley Conservancy: (540) 886-3541; Staunton
-Upper James Roundtable/RC&D: (540) 319-6453; Natural Bridge SWCD
-Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF): (804) 780-1392.

Natural Bridge SWCD also values its partnership with the **three entities** it serves:

The County of Rockbridge

The City of Buena Vista

The City of Lexington

Grants and Partners

*Since 2000 (for the past 25 years), the NBSWCD serves as lead district and fiscal agent for the Upper James Roundtable/ RC&D. Regionally serving the counties of Rockbridge, Botetourt, Craig, Allegheny, Bath, and Highland.

*Lead district, partnering with DEQ, in the development of potential TMDL Implementation Plans within district boundaries.

*Partners with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to promote the Upper James River Watershed Buffer Program. A program to install riparian forested buffers offering technical assistance and cost-share funding to landowners.

*Partnership with Boxerwood Education Association to continue a sustainable Envirothon Team for the county of Rockbridge and to promote other student educational initiatives.

*Partnership with Shenandoah Valley Agricultural Research and Extension Center (AREC) and Mountain Castles SWCD to coordinate and provide a venue for the Area I Envirothon Competition and SWCD Field Day.

*Environmental education programs with Enviroscope demonstrations in local schools, and joint efforts with Boxerwood, the Virginia Department of Forestry, NRCS, Farm Service Agency, and others.

*Supports Youth Conservation Camp and Forestry Camp.

*Partnership with the Shenandoah Valley Conservancy, formerly Valley Conservation Council (VCC), to co-hold riparian conservation easements.

*Promotes the VCAP program for Urban Best Management Practices.

Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program
Program Year 2025

The District is responsible for administering the Virginia Agricultural BMP Cost-Share Program in Rockbridge County. The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation funds this program through the Water Quality Improvement Act and other state sources. These cost-share funds provide an incentive to agricultural producers and landowners to apply beneficial BMPs to their lands for more effective control of sediments, nutrient losses, and transport of pollutants into streams and waterways.

During program year 2025, the Natural Bridge SWCD completed 52 Best Management Practices. Producers were paid \$952,316.18 for these BMPs. Within these totals:

1 CCI maintenance practice protecting 1300 feet of streambank fencing was paid \$3,125.00.

1 FR-1 tree planting practice involving 4 acres was paid in the amount of \$13,497.60.

7 stream exclusion projects protected 30,960 feet of stream bank and were paid \$756,603.86 in cost-share dollars.

6 SL-1 cost-share practices were completed for the establishment of grass and legume vegetation on cropland to reduce soil erosion and enhance water quality. Practices paid totaled \$40,272.82.

37 SL-8B and SL-8H cover crop BMPs involving 2,780.7 acres were completed and paid \$138,816.90.

In addition, nearly \$1,308,200.71 has been obligated to approved BMP practices and will be carried over into cost-share program year 2026.

District Operations

The Natural Bridge SWCD Treasurer, along with the Finance Committee, oversee the operating budget. The budget includes administration of funds for education, sponsorships, special grants, programs and general operating expenses. The District receives support funding from the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, and from the County of Rockbridge and the cities of Lexington and Buena Vista. During the accounting process, monthly reports are generated, tracking the multiple programs and grants the District administers. The Natural Bridge SWCD is audited every two years to ensure the proper use of funds. Letters to request support funding from the local entities

served by the district are submitted to the three localities in January of each year, prior to the new fiscal year which begins July 1.

Strategic Plan for 2025-2028

The Natural Bridge SWCD works from a long-term strategic plan. Annual planning of district operations involves other agencies, organizations and/or individuals and enlists their continuing participation beyond plan development. A new strategic plan was developed in the Fall of 2024 and was unanimously adopted by the board of directors on December 18, 2024. The new strategic plan will serve, in part, as a guide for the district's work for the next 4 years. It will translate to a district annual plan of work with specific objectives. These objectives from the annual plan are reflected in the operational budget.

TMDL Watershed Implementation Grants

The Natural Bridge SWCD, in partnership with the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (VADEQ), and other local agencies work together to plan strategies for local TMDL implementation. Discussions and collaborative meetings take place for plan development as the need arises. As appropriate for each individual TMDL implementation, cost-share is available for practices such as: livestock exclusion, improved riparian areas, afforestation of crop, hay, and pastureland, permanent vegetation cover on critical areas, pasture management as well as residential BMPs for septic tank pump out and septic repair systems.

2025 Upper James River Roundtable/RC&D

The Natural Bridge SWCD is lead district, sponsor, and fiscal agent for the Upper James RC & D. In May 2025, a grant agreement was signed by the board for funding through the VA Department of Environmental Quality (VDEQ) in the form of a support grant to continue the work of the original Upper James Roundtable. The Upper James RC&D (Resource Conservation and Development Council) serves the regions of Rockbridge, Alleghany, Bath, Highland, Botetourt, and Craig Counties and the cities within. Various public meetings and natural resource workshops are sponsored by the Upper James Roundtable/Upper James RC&D and supplies conservation grants in the form of sub-awards to local partnering agencies and grassroots groups. The current grant provides for administration and reporting of activities, invasive species removal and native planting, and educational outreach in the Upper James Watershed providing workshops to share information about the benefits of

conservation easements and other land conservation practices. The grant will also fund a Kids Fishing Day at the Natural Bridge State Park on Cedar Creek, an Upper James River tributary. The creek will be stocked with trout ahead of the event and will provide an educational opportunity for youths to learn about the importance of maintaining clean waters in our rivers. A cooking demonstration will offer participants the chance to have the trout they caught grilled on an open-air fire. Two partner meetings and landowner outreach events in the Upper James watershed will allow for a connection with landowners to convey the benefits of conservation easements. A beginner-friendly paddle and float for conservation stakeholders will be available in August on the Upper James River near Buchanan. This event will provide conservation networking and capacity-building for participants as well as promotion of the BMP cost-share program. Grant projects will be completed by the end of 2025, with a total budget of \$14,276.

Educational Outreach



The SWCD formed a partnership with Boxerwood to recruit and train high school students for an Envirothon team. During their after school sessions, team members learned about the five Envirothon topics of study: forestry, soils, aquatics, wildlife and the special topic. The team was coached by Ginny Johnson, assisted by Caterina Contreras. Team members participated at the Area I Envirothon Competition held on April 29, 2025 at McCormick Farm in Raphine. The event was hosted by the Natural Bridge SWCD and the Mountain Castles SWCD, in partnership with the staff of McCormick Farm, (AREC). This year, the students created and delivered a presentation to address the Envirothon special topic: "Roots and Resiliency: Fostering Forest Stewardship in a Canopy of Change". This participation challenged the students by providing opportunities for research of potential solutions to problems posed by timber harvesting and management, climate change impacts, soil health and other related topics. The district looks forward to working with Boxerwood and these dedicated students during the coming school year.

Photographs of Envirothon 2025 can be found on the final pages of the annual report.

Agricultural Community Outreach Event Shenandoah Valley AREC

On May 22, 2025, Natural Bridge SWCD partnered with the Shenandoah Valley AREC, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Virginia State University to sponsor a field day for local farmers and interested residents. The field day had a very successful turnout and highlighted Native Warm Season Grasses as the theme. Tours were provided to field trial sites where discussions were held by Gabriel Pent, Superintendent of Shenandoah Valley AREC. Other speakers for the event were JB Daniel, State Grassland Agronomist with NRCS and Keith Tuck a producer sharing his first-hand knowledge of using warm season grasses within his grazing system. An agenda and SWCD contact information were provided.



JB Daniel



Field Day Participants at Trial Site



Dr. Ben Tracey – Native Warm Season Grasses Field Day

Rockbridge Regional Fair Informational Booth



Natural Bridge SWCD Office Administrator, Jennifer Huffman stands here alongside the District's display at the Rockbridge Regional Fair in September. The entire Lexington USDA Service Center was represented on the display to include the SWCD, NRCS and FSA. Each agency provided outreach information on available programs along with office contact information.

2024 Annual Awards Banquet



FFA Representatives accepting district support for the upcoming year were, from L-R; Jaylee Croushorn, Gwen Gosney, Chapter Advisor and Josie Caldwell.

The 2024 Clean Water Farm Award was presented to Gavin Worley of Worley Mountain Farms. The farm owns and operates 49 acres on the south side of Rockbridge County and is dedicated to grazing livestock. The farm currently has 25 cow/calf pairs and is very active in conservation practices including: stream exclusion, forage and biomass planting, herbaceous weed control, and rotational grazing to help control erosion and stockpile grasses.

Special district recognitions were presented by District Chairman Rob Deyo. Door prizes were donated by local businesses and from individuals for the event. Prizes were distributed to winning ticket holders. District Director Tom Stanley served as Master of Ceremonies.



In March, a Sawmill Tour held at Deacon's Sawmill was attended by NBSWCD Directors and staff: From L-R are Charles Winder, Tom Stanley, Tim Goodbar and Jennifer Huffman.

Partnership Acknowledgement Statement:

The Commonwealth of Virginia supports the Natural Bridge Soil and Water Conservation District by providing administrative and operational support funding, technical assistance funding, and cost-share dollars through the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR).

In addition, other sources of financial support include:

- Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (VA DEQ) by providing TMDL grant funds for stream exclusion practices, residential septic practices and technical assistance in TMDL watersheds.
- Tributary Strategies Funding initiatives from VA DEQ to support the Upper James Roundtable/RC&D, Natural Bridge SWCD acting as lead district and fiscal agent.
- The County of Rockbridge
- The City of Buena Vista
- The City of Lexington

In addition, the Natural Bridge SWCD benefits greatly by cooperation and assistance from:

- Department of Conservation and Recreation-Division of Soil and Water Conservation (DCR)
- Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
- Natural Resources Conservation Service-USDA (NRCS)
- Farm Service Agency (FSA)
- Rural Development (RD)
- Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE)
- Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF)
- Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) formerly VDGIF
- Shenandoah Valley Agricultural Research & Extension Center – McCormick Farm
- U. S. Forest Service (USFS)
- All Virginia Area I Soil and Water Conservation Districts
- Rockbridge County Public Schools
- Lexington City Public Schools
- Buena Vista City Public Schools
- Rockbridge County FFA Chapter
- 4-H Clubs of Rockbridge County
- Boxerwood Education Association
- Washington & Lee University
- Virginia Military Institute
- Rockbridge Conservation (RACC)

- Virginia Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS)
- Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission (CSPDC)
- U. S. Army Corp of Engineers (ACE)
- Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF)
- Shenandoah Valley Conservancy, formerly Valley Conservation Council
- Upper James River Roundtable/RC&D
- James River Association (JRA)
- Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board (VSWCB)
- Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (VASWCD)
- National Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (NACD)

The U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status.

Photographs:

Area I Envirothon Team Competition – April 2025



Competing Teams discuss the impacts of Climate Change during Oral Presentations.



Teams discuss Aquatics questions with Test Station Judge, Tara Sieber beside the stream at the old mill, McCormick Farm.



Teams examine pelts and taxidermy mounts to answer questions at the Wildlife Station.

Students answer questions about Soils in the Soils Pit.



Teams gather to hear announcements from Tim Miller of Mountain Castles SWCD, co-host of the 2025 event.

2025 Area I Envirothon Team Placings were:

First Place Team – Harrisonburg City

Second Place Team – Eastern Mennonite High School

Third Place Team – Mountain Vista

Test Runners; Gus Wilkinson, NRCS and Lee Cummings, NBSWCD Director take tests to the official Envirothon Scorekeepers.



We work with the people who work the land.

Annual Report of District Operations Natural Bridge SWCD

Natural Bridge SWCD Annual Report for FY 2024-25

<u>FY 24-25 Board of Directors</u>	<u>Associate Directors</u>	<u>NRCS-USDA Staff</u>
Robert G. Deyo Chairman of the Board	Brian Jenkins Larry Hurd	Dorian Perez District Conservationist
Herbert “Herbie” Huffman Vice Chairman	<u>NBSWCD Staff</u> Robert Hickman Conservation Specialist & District Manager	Robert “Gus” Wilkinson Soil Conservationist
Charles Winder Treasurer	Buzzy Reese Conservation Technician	Hannah Sawyer Soil Conservationist
Robbie Beard	Jennifer Huffman Office Administrator & Secretary of the Board	
Lee Cummings	Margaret Spencer Administrative Assistant, Part-Time	
Tim Goodbar		
Billy Grose		
Thomas A. Stanley, VCE		

All programs and services of the Natural Bridge Soil and Water Conservation District are offered on a nondiscriminatory basis, without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, marital status, or handicap.

Natural Bridge SWCD
Lexington USDA Service Center
40 Magnolia Square Way, Suite 5
Lexington, Virginia 24450

Mission Statement

To represent the public providing local leadership in the conservation of natural resources.