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Conservation buff: Practices positively impact bottom line

By STEVE WERBLOW
Special to *The Delmarva Farmer*

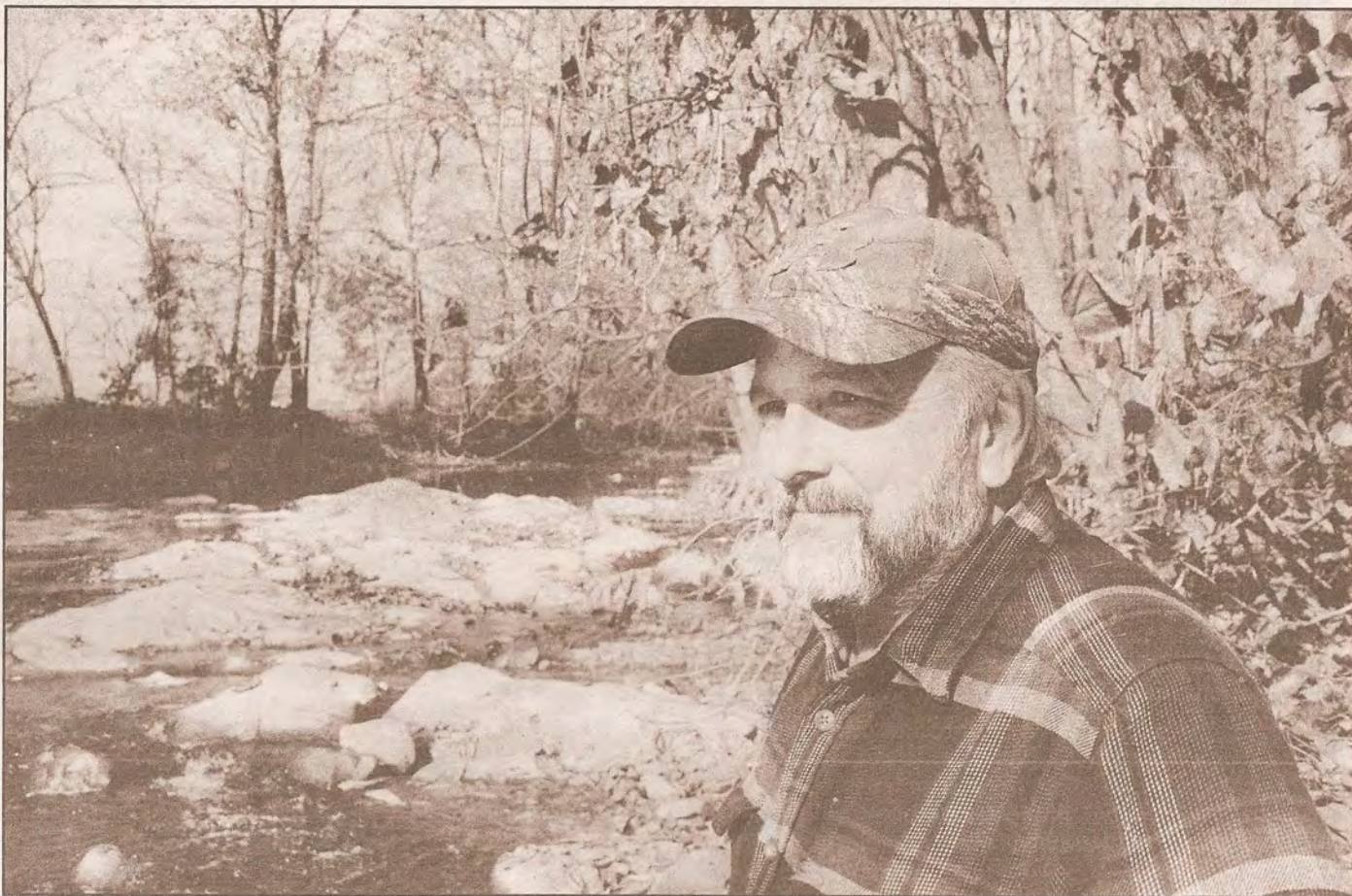
DAYTON, Va. — Fencing cattle out of streamside pastures and planting cover crop blends seem like ways to drive up costs, but Buff Showalter of Fox Run Farm says those investments are making his 200-acre crop, forage, cattle and broiler operation more efficient.

When Showalter bought a neighbor's pasture along the Lower Dry River of Muddy Creek, he took 20 acres out of production in an irregularly-shaped swath along the stream, fencing it from cattle.

Eight watering stations fed by 1.5 miles of pipe — funded in part by a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program project — allow more efficient rotational grazing and keep cattle from requiring access to the river.

“It would have been marginal pasture,” Showalter said. “With more intensive rotational grazing, I probably gained back most if not all of what we took out.”

Standing by a stretch of the Lower Dry River that he and the past seven generations of his family have hunted and fished, Showalter notes that it was choked with sediment and algae in the



Farmer, fisherman and outdoorsman Buff Showalter is the seventh generation of his family to farm along Lower Dry River near Dayton, Va. He is committed to improving the creek's water quality, which contributes to improvements all the way to Chesapeake Bay.

Photo by Steve Werblow

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SHOPWORKS

THE AG-ARTS CONNECTION

Video simulation allows students to become temporary farmers

Showalter's manure mixture popular for soil-building impact

By STEVE WERBLOW
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DAYTON, Va. — Reducing the volume of manure and litter helps Buff Showalter streamline nutrient management on his farm.

Litter from his broiler operation — which turns out about 350,000 chickens per year — is composted before being trucked to southwest Virginia, where

crop farmers lack local litter.

Showalter says the process cuts the volume of litter in half compared to what he had to haul 20 years ago. He added that many farmers recognize the soil-building impact of litter.

“The long-term effect of using litter judiciously is you’re adding organic matter — it’s a much better soil-building material than 10-10-10,” Showalter said. “10-10-10 will give you lots of green grass and

hay, but it won’t build your soil.”

Showalter built a bed-pack barn for steers he backgrounds on his farm.

He scrapes the floor and applies the blend of manure, straw and corn fodder to his fields.

The mixture has twice the potassium and half the phosphorus of raw manure per ton, he said, helping him stay within bounds on his phosphorus application plan.

Conservation ...

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1970s and '80s.

Today, the riffles run clear, and fish and crayfish have returned to the creek.

Showalter says the improvement is the result of an area-wide effort.

— In recent years, most of the watershed’s farmers have excluded cattle from the river and adopted cover crops and no-till to reduce soil erosion.

“If you keep the soil on the farm where it belongs, it’s not an issue,” he said.

A 2016 report on data collected through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s National Aquatic Resource Survey found that 53 percent of the river and stream miles in the Mid-Atlantic region — which extends from upstate New York to below Norfolk, Va., and includes most of the Chesapeake Bay watershed — are rated “poor” for phosphorus levels, 19 percent are “fair” and 28 percent are “good.”

For total nitrogen levels in the region, 39 percent of the river and stream miles were rated “poor,” 23 percent “fair” and 38 percent “good.”

Cleanup plans for the Chesapeake Bay call for a reduction by 2025 of 29 percent in phosphorus from agricultural sources compared to 2009 loads, and 37 percent cuts in agricultural contributions of nitrogen.

Though the Chesapeake Bay rules are relatively new, Showalter notes that his father and grandfather planted cover crops to reduce erosion and improve soil quality after years of heavy tillage and aggressive farming that pervaded through the Dust Bowl era. It’s a tradition he has revived and combined with continuous no-till over the past 12 years.

“We’re picking up one of the things they did and applying modern technology — GMO seeds and no-till,” he said. “We’ve got the best of their world and the best of ours.”

Showalter mixes a wide range of cover crop species to get the effect he’s looking for, drilling the mix in August or early September to encourage good growth before the weather turns cold.

Triticale and oats create a fast-growing, sturdy scaffold for wooly pod vetch to climb, fixing nitrogen in the soil as it blooms.

Austrian winter peas and crimson clover add more nitrogen to the soil, while the deep taproot of forage rad-



Electric fencing keeps cattle away from sensitive waterways, protecting water quality and enabling Showalter to intensively graze his cattle.

Photo by Steve Werblow

ish breaks up compaction and aerates the lower root zone.

It’s a tangled mix that replicates the diversity of natural meadows, Showalter said, adding nutrients, loosening the soil, and creating vital organic matter.

“We switched to no-till and cover crops and more plant density and saw soil organic matter go from 1.9 or 2.2 to 4.5 or 5,” he said. “Obviously, something’s working. There’s no question in my mind that the economic value of that is huge. You also see the ability of the soil to hold moisture, which is crucial. I can’t put

a price on that.”

Rolling and crimping the cover crop in the spring, Showalter no-tills corn directly into the residue and said the cash crop thrives.

“By using nitrogen-producing cover crops — clovers and vetch — and letting those grow up in the spring, you get more than enough nitrogen to grow a corn crop. We harvest 24 or 25 tons of silage an acre. On yield checks, we’ve grown the equivalent of 200-bushel corn with this method.”

Chad Watts, executive director of the Indiana-based Conservation Technology Information Center, said

Showalter’s experience highlights the many ways conservation practices can be sustainable.

“Buff Showalter’s practices contribute to the improvements we’ve seen in Chesapeake Bay, to his bottom line, and to the soils the next generations of his family will be farming,” Watts said. “As farmers adopt practices like these nationwide, we’ll see healthier streams and healthier farms across the country.”

For more information on cover crops, conservation systems and the National Aquatic Resources Survey, visit www.ctic.org/WaterQuality.