

Recommendations & Policy Options: Virginia's Agricultural Cost-Share Program to Improve Water Quality

JLARC staff typically make recommendations to address findings during reviews. Staff also sometimes propose policy options rather than recommendations. The three most common reasons staff propose policy options rather than recommendations are: (1) the action proposed is a policy judgment best made by the General Assembly or other elected officials, (2) the evidence indicates that addressing a report finding is not necessarily required, but doing so could be beneficial, or (3) there are multiple ways in which a report finding could be addressed and there is insufficient evidence of a single best way to address the finding.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act directing the secretary of natural and historic resources to oversee a joint effort by the Department of Conservation and Recreation and Department of Environmental Quality to develop a ranked list of the cost-effectiveness of agricultural best management practices for the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program and make the information available to Virginia soil and water conservation districts to help inform award decisions. (Chapter 2)

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board should implement a pilot program through which selected soil and water conservation districts and the Department of Conservation and Recreation work together to (i) analyze local and state data to identify potentially eligible producers who are not currently participating in the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program, and (ii) facilitate the use of the results by districts to maximize their recruitment of eligible non-participants. (Chapter 4)

RECOMMENDATION 3

The Department of Conservation and Recreation should ensure that its conservation planner certification program (i) provides staff at soil and water conservation districts with sufficient knowledge in all areas needed to effectively administer the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program (VACS), including farming practices, conservation, and VACS administration and (ii) offers each course at least twice per year so that district staff can complete the training in a reasonable timeframe. (Chapter 4)

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board should direct the Department of Conservation and Recreation to conduct a pilot program to temporarily increase cost-share rates for the most cost-effective best management practices in the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program and report to the board whether the higher rates (i) helped increase implementation and (ii) should be adopted statewide. (Chapter 5)

RECOMMENDATION 5

The General Assembly may wish to consider including language in the Appropriation Act directing the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) to revise the process that districts use to select the applicants that receive Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program funding awards to better ensure that the most cost-effective agricultural best management practices identified by DCR are consistently prioritized. (Chapter 6)

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board should update the specifications for cover crop best management practices in the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program Manual to establish standardized methods and guidance for soil and water conservation district staff to verify cover crop soil coverage. (Chapter 7)

RECOMMENDATION 7

The Department of Conservation and Recreation should provide training to soil and water conservation district staff on acceptable methods for verifying cover crop soil coverage. (Chapter 7)

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board should require that all structural agricultural best management practices in the Southern Rivers area receive end-of-lifespan reviews within the last two to three years of their lifespan. (Chapter 7)

RECOMMENDATION 9

The Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board should direct the Department of Conservation and Recreation to evaluate and strengthen the administrative audits of soil and water conservation district staff files for the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program. (Chapter 7)

RECOMMENDATION 10

The Department of Conservation and Recreation should (i) ensure that information on the frequency, cause, and resolution of best management practice project noncompliance is tracked in the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program, (ii) review this information annually to identify noncompliance trends, and (iii) notify the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board of these trends so that it may make needed program adjustments and policy changes and resolve systemic problems. (Chapter 7)

Policy Options to Consider

POLICY OPTION 1

The General Assembly could adjust appropriation funding for the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program by accounting for recent differences between calculated needs and actual obligations. (Chapter 3)

POLICY OPTION 2

The General Assembly could include language in the Appropriation Act directing the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board to consolidate funding for the Whole Farm Approach agricultural best management practices (BMPs) with funding used for other BMPs in the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program. (Chapter 6)

POLICY OPTION 3

The General Assembly could include language in the Appropriation Act directing the Department of Conservation and Recreation to develop a plan to reduce the state's reliance on annual practices in the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program, while still maintaining progress toward the state's pollution reduction goals. (Chapter 6)
