

# Cover Crop A Way To Keep Moisture Through Virginia's Weird Weather

Greg Rion stood in a field on his farm Monday afternoon in west Rockingham County, where small green sprouts grappled past the brown dry corn plant remnants toward the waning sun in the west.

The small green leads of rye peppered the otherwise brown field.

“It’s a great thing,” Rion said.

The rye will serve as a cover crop, he said.

Cover crop is a way to improve the ability of soil in a field to hold moisture that has evaded farmers like Rion this year.

The same fields where the rye is now sprouting are usually where he is able to harvest corn as a cash crop, but this year, due to the lack of rain for hay and the stunted corn, he is instead using it as feed for his cows through the winter.

“We’ve been really short of rain this whole year,” Rion said of himself and some other western Rockingham County farmers.

Local farmers had to deal with a dry summer, and this winter is proving similar for many throughout the area.

Mike Phillips, with the Natural Resources Conservation Service Harrisonburg field office and a farmer, has been a proponent of cover crop for years, as evidenced by one of his hats he often wears.

Phillips has worn the hat that reads, “Soil is meant to be covered,” for about 15 of the 17 years he has worked with the NRCS.

“When we improve our soil quality, we are building our soils to be able to hold more water capacity,” he said.

The practice, which reduces the impact of weather conditions like droughts, continues to gain momentum, according to Phillips and numerous industry and media reports.

“A lot of farmers are going in that direction now,” Phillips said. “They’re seeing those benefits.”

Bob Threewitts, a Keezletown farmer, said the cost of planting crops, like many other things in the age of COVID-19 and supply chain issues, is going to be up “substantially” next year.

Though the “critical point” for planting is around 100 days off, if the trend of low precipitation continues, it will influence farmers’ decisions on whether to risk planting in a field where there is too little moisture, he said.

“The gamble on soils with low subsoil moisture will probably influence some decisions come spring,” Threewitts said.

There is still time for moisture to find its way deep into every field in the Valley, he said.

“We’re going to need a good bit of rain and snow this winter to replenish it,” Threewitts said.

Phillips’ father always said the Shenandoah Valley is a great place — south enough to avoid the North’s brutal winters and north enough to avoid the South’s sweltering summers.

Yet, the region has its own foibles.

“We’re sitting in one of the driest areas east of the Mississippi because of the mountain ranges, so when you get a weather pattern always going around you, it’s not uncommon” to have droughts, Phillips said.

As a result, anything that can be done to mitigate the damage of such expected delays between rain is a way to build resilience among farms and what they produce, according to Phillips.

“A farmer has to be an optimist,” Phillips said. “When you place that seed in the ground, you gotta have faith it will grow.”

# Lack Of Rain Hurting Local Farmers

**KEEZLETOWN** — Mary Jo Mitchell looked out over one of her and her husband's cattle pastures Wednesday and let out a sigh.

"It's pitiful," she said.

One small patch of green stands out in a sea of otherwise brown, dead grass.

"Bone dry," Mitchell said.

Rockingham County farmers are grappling with a lack of rain that is proving problematic in countless ways to producers of all stripes — crops, poultry and cattle included.

In July of 2020 and 2019, the Dale Enterprise weather station recorded 3.12 inches and 2.98 inches of rain, respectively.

This July, only 1.74 inches has been recorded so far, according to National Weather Service data sourced from the Dale Enterprise weather station 5 miles west of Harrisonburg. The year-to-date total recorded at the station was 17.46 inches as of Wednesday, compared to the annual average to July 31 of 20.36.

"To say we're jealous of the people of Staunton and Waynesboro for all the rain they got last night is an understatement," Mitchell said at the pasture.

There hasn't been a cow munching in that pasture for nearly two weeks and still, the grass has not grown for when Art and Mary Jo Mitchell need to rotate their cattle back into it soon.

"There's nothing there," said Art Mitchell, a former agriculture instructor at Montevideo Middle School. "It's not growing."

This is the first year the Rockingham County farmers have had to feed their cows hay in July.

"We've made hay in August before, but this is not August," he said.

The lack of rain is also impacting how much hay they're able to make as they're on their third cutting. And the prospects don't look good. The second cutting yielded about a third as much hay as the first cutting, and they're expecting worse for the third.

"We're starting to use our winter feed already," Art Mitchell said.

The lack of rain isn't just impacting their cattle, but also the Mitchells' corn crop, which has been stunted by the lack of water, he said.

"If we don't get any rain, they'll be very few ears on there, and that's where the feed value is," Mitchell said.

Typically, a stalk could have two ears, but this crop is looking to have maybe one ear per two stalks, according to Mitchell.

He said shortages of crops like corn drive up prices for farmers across the board, such as for feed for poultry farmers, and the price increase is passed to the consumer but doesn't make its way back to producers.

Larry Burner, owner of C and D Water Hauling, said he has heard other farmers have also needed to feed their cattle hay these dry days.

"There's a long time between July and April and May where you can start making hay for the winter," he said. "There's a big gap."

Services of local water haulers like Burner are in high demand these days. Burner has been hauling water since '87, and he doesn't remember a year this bad since 1996.

"This is one of the worst ones," he said while filling a wildlife pond for a retired farmer in Mount Crawford.

Burner said he is prioritizing deliveries for farmers and ponds that support wildlife due to the extremity of the situation.

He said poultry houses are having issues keeping their stock hydrated and healthy. A typical poultry house can use up to 1,000 gallons of water an hour and typically pulls from springs or ponds.

Philip Knight drives one of the two 1,900-gallon water trucks for Showman's Water Hauling in Linville, and the company sources its water from a spring.

He said some farmers and others in community are worried their springs could stop filling back up because it's so dry, and there's a good possibility it could happen to the spring Showman's uses.

Art Mitchell said several days of frequent rain are needed to help the water seep deep into the ground.

However, Kyle Pallozzi, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, said that is unlikely to happen this week.

"There is another chance of thunderstorms tomorrow afternoon, but it's the type of thing where not everyone will see one," he said Wednesday.

He said widespread rainfall is possible early next week, but it is still uncertain.

The Mitchells, meanwhile, remain on the lookout for downpours, hoping the brown grass in their pastures will return to a healthy green sooner rather than later.

“You put those seeds in the ground, you have to have faith,” Art Mitchell said. “But then it’s up to the Lord to send the rain.”

# State Dairy Program Changes Meant To Help Farmers, Environment

Jay Krueger, a farmer in Linville, was skeptical when the new program was rolled out.

After all, its precursor was a disaster.

But other farmers and his family talked more and more, and they decided to go for it in the first year — and it's been worth it.

The Kruegers, like roughly three-quarters of Virginia dairy farmers, pay for coverage through the Dairy Margin Coverage program, which was rolled out through the 2018 Farm Bill as a point of insurance for dairies to avoid the pitfalls between low milk prices and high feed prices that have plagued the agricultural sector for years.

“We've been in it since it started,” Krueger said of the program.

Still, many farmers hesitated to join the program since they have gotten burned by its predecessor, the Margin Protection Program, or MPP for short, according to Eric Paulson, treasurer and secretary of the Virginia State Dairymen's Association.

“It did not work at all,” he said. “Dairy farmers paid a lot into the program and the prices were low, but the payments didn't kick in. A lot of farmers had a really sour taste.”

He said dairy farmers nationwide paid in about \$100 million, and only about one-tenth of it was paid back out to farmers even as the prices hammered them.

“The MPP wasn't worth a hoot,” Krueger said.

State Sen. Mark Obenshain, R-Rockingham, Del. Wendy Gooditis, D-Clarke County, and industry groups saw an opportunity to both get more people enrolled in the improved margin program to potentially help farmers and also gain ground on the state's environmental goals.

The resulting legislation, the Dairy Producer Margin Coverage Premium Assistance Program, passed this year and went into effect in July. It has the state reimburse farmers for what they paid on a level of coverage from the Dairy Margin Coverage program if they have an environmental action plan.

If a farmer has a resource management plan or nutrient management plan approved by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation or a local soil and water conservation district or the farmer is covered under tier one of the Dairy Margin Coverage program, the state will reimburse the dairies for their annual premium payment, according to the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

“There’s a lot on pressure on farms and on policymakers to adopt best management practices to clean up our waterways,” Obenshain said. “In Virginia, we have long adopted the view it’s important to offer incentives to promote voluntary adoption of best management practices.”

Brad Copenhaver, the director of VDACS, said the new state complement to the DMC is about leveraging state dollars to help residents get access to federal dollars if they need them.

“We’re getting a lot of bang for our buck here,” he said.

Obenshain said the tangible benefit of the plan is key to getting people interested.

“It also advances the policy objective of preserving an important component in our agricultural marketplace,” he said.

Rockingham County is where the most dairy in Virginia comes from, but dairies across the state have all been closing in recent years with low prices for milk and high input prices — such as the crops they use to help feed their livestock.

Paulson said the average amount a dairy farmer in the DMC got out last year was \$47,339 per operation.

“That’s entirely because we have low milk prices and ever-increasing feed costs,” Paulson said.

According to Paulson, feed can account for 60% to 65% of production costs, and some prices have jumped by 33%.

“We’re seeing it really take place right now. Corn, alfalfa, soybeans have all jumped up like other” commodity prices, he said.

Obenshain said safety nets for farmers are important not only to industry, but also to the community, since Rockingham is where the most milk in the state comes from.

“Loudoun County used to be one of the most prolific dairy areas in Virginia, and now dairy production in Loudoun County is virtually nonexistent,” Obenshain said.

Obenshain said he had introduced the bill in previous years, but it passed this year because state representatives prioritized funding the complementary funds for the DMC.

“We want milk prices to be great and this program not to have to be, but it’s important to have that safety net there, especially in circumstances we’re dealing with now, like in the pandemic when the market got turned upside down,” he said.

Enrollment in the state program ends in February, according to VDACS.

Krueger said he’ll talk to other farmers, experts and VDACS staff about the state program since he intends to stay in the DMC because of low milk prices, high feed prices and concentration in agriculture forcing smaller operations out of business.

“It really is a shame what’s happened in this industry in the last 20 years,” Krueger said. “It’s like everything else is geared towards [being] bigger and more efficient — if that’s what you call it.”