



SFOP Quarterly NEWSLETTER

Summer | 2025

From the Director's Desk



William Crutchfield
SFOP Director

Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments.

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Cultivating the Future: Why We Need More Young Farmers

The American farmer is aging. According to the most recent data from the USDA, the average age of the American farmer is now 57 and a half years old. That number has been climbing steadily over the past few decades, and fewer young people are stepping forward to take their place. This generational gap in agriculture presents a serious challenge—not only for our food system, but for the future of our environment, economy, and rural communities.

The declining interest of young people in agriculture is a multifaceted issue, shaped by social, economic, and cultural shifts. Several key factors contribute to this trend:

1. Perception and Image:

Agriculture often carries an outdated image—one rooted in long hours, unpredictable outcomes, and little reward. Many young people associate farming with hard manual labor, not realizing how much the field has evolved. Careers in medicine, engineering, business, or tech are more frequently encouraged, while agriculture is rarely presented as a viable or prestigious path.

2. Education and Skills Gap:

Today's agriculture is deeply integrated with science, technology, and data-driven practices. However, many school systems and career counselors don't highlight these advancements. There is a lack of visible pathways connecting students to modern farming careers that incorporate innovations like drones, automation, soil sensors, vertical farming, and regenerative agriculture.

3. Urbanization and Disconnection from Land:

As more families move to cities and suburbs, fewer young people grow up with a direct connection to farming or land stewardship. Without personal experience or role models in agriculture, it's harder for youth to imagine themselves in the field.

4. Financial Barriers:

Starting a farm can require access to land, equipment, and capital—none of which come easily to young people, especially those without generational wealth or agricultural family backgrounds. The entry costs can feel insurmountable.

5. Environmental Concerns:

Climate change has added a layer of uncertainty to farming. Unpredictable weather patterns, water shortages, and soil degradation make agriculture seem risky. Yet, these challenges also represent an opportunity to engage youth who care deeply about environmental justice and sustainability.

To reverse this trend, it's essential to promote agriculture as a dynamic field with opportunities in technology, sustainability, and innovation. Engaging young people through education, showcasing success stories, and providing support for new ventures could help rekindle their interest in this vital sector.

So, all of us that are engaged in this great and many occupations in the field of agriculture. Let's do our self a favor by inviting a child to experience the joys of farming.

Another record year for cost-share funding in Virginia

By Matt Sabas, Senior Public Relations & Marketing Specialist,
Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation



Livestock stream exclusion on Bellevue Farm

For the fourth year in a row, record-breaking cost-share assistance is available for farmers through the Virginia Agricultural Best Management Practices Cost-Share Program (VACS).

Farmers in Virginia can contact their local soil and water conservation district (SWCD) to receive up to \$300,000 a year for implementing over 60 best management practices (BMPs) on their operation. Here's a closer look at how a few BMPs can benefit both the environment and your bottom line:

Nutrient Management Planning

Nutrient management planning helps farmers apply the right amount of fertilizer at the right time, reducing excess runoff into waterways and protecting water quality. It lowers fertilizer costs and boosts yields by ensuring crops get the nutrients they need without waste. Here's another plus: a fully implemented nutrient management plan is a requirement for more than 30 VACS and tax-credit practices. Besides saving money on inputs, the plan is a gateway to more cost-share funding, making it a perfect first practice for farmers new to BMPs.

Cover Crops

Cover crops protect soil from erosion, improve soil health by enhancing organic matter, and reduce nonpoint source pollution by slowing runoff and taking up excess nitrogen that would otherwise leach into the water table. Cover cropping can benefit your farm's bottom line by increasing long-term crop yields, reducing the need for fertilizers, while reducing input costs by improving soil fertility naturally.

This year, the cost-share reimbursement rate is \$40/acre for traditional small grain cover crop, and farmers can receive additional payments for early planting, rye cultivars and late kill down.

Livestock Stream Exclusion

Excluding livestock from streams reduces streambank erosion and decreases the amount of sediment that local waterways carry. It also eliminates the bacteria associated with livestock waste that cause illness in both animals and humans while cleaner water leads to increased weight gain in cattle. This year, the cost-share reimbursement rate is up to 100% of the cost of eligible components based on the width of the buffer and practice lifespan.

Small Herd Initiative

If you're a farmer with 20-49 head of cattle, you qualify for the Small Herd Initiative, which provides funding for farmers to keep livestock out of streams without competing for funding against larger operations. The initiative pays for up to 100% cost-share for stream protection practices with a cap of \$50,000 per operation.

Contact your local Soil and Water Conservation District

The Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) administers the cost-share program in partnership with Virginia's 47 SWCDs. Virginia's SWCDs work directly with farmers to distribute cost-share funding from the VACS program and provide technical assistance for its implementation.

Farmers interested in applying for funding should contact their local SWCDs. A map of local conservation districts and contact information can be found here: <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/soil-and-water/swcds>.



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“It’s never just about food”

Neil E. Brown, Ph.D.



Photo credit: Catherine Fisher, PEC

Students, farmers and food bank and pantry representatives pose for a picture before parting ways for the day

As the sun rose over Richmond on the last Saturday in March, VSU students were already heading north on I-95, with more than two hours of driving still ahead. Their destination: the Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows in Northern Virginia, where they would spend the day experiencing the “farm to table” journey—this time through the lens of food banks and pantries.

The Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows is an organic vegetable and fruit farm operated by the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC). The farm takes pride in growing high-quality produce for food banks and kitchens in Loudoun and Clarke counties in Northern Virginia. “The joy of eating is also a visual experience,” said farm manager Teddy Pitsiokos. “We aim to produce high-quality crops—like lettuce with leaves free of holes.”

Students and staff spent the day planting lettuce and turnips, learning farming techniques, and exploring the opportunities and challenges of growing consistent, successful crops. They also engaged in conversations with food bank and pantry leaders—all leading to one key takeaway: it’s never just about the food. “The trip to Piedmont Farm was extremely insightful for me. I was given a first-hand glimpse into the life, struggles and successes of a farmer”, stated Jeremiah Monts, third year Environmental Science student minoring in Political Science.

Our discussions deepened with the arrival of Mary Parham, who leads the Christ Church Cares food pantry, and Jennifer Montgomery, President and CEO of Loudoun Hunger Relief. “I believe it’s a beautiful thing to provide healthy foods to people who have limited access,” Montgomery said.



Students having conversation with farm manager, Teddy Pitsiokos

Discussions and lessons learned covered a wide range of topics, including the demographics of clients served by food pantries and food banks, and the distinction between food banks and food kitchens.

Participants reflected on the role of youth and community in improving public access to nutritious food. Other topics included work-life balance, dumpster diving, food policy, and the social, environmental, and ethical dimensions of food systems—such as distribution, employment, and more.

The conversation also “hit home” when it shifted to the Hunger Free Campus Food Pantry Grant Program. Supported by Governor Glenn Youngkin, the program aims to provide \$500,000 in funding to support food pantries at eligible colleges. Some estimates suggest that nearly 1 in 4 college students (25%) experience food insecurity—meaning they lack consistent access to healthy food. This can negatively impact attendance, GPA, graduation rates, and contribute to increased stress, depression, and poorer overall health. Students from low-income households, first-generation college students, older students, and those with disabilities are among the groups at higher risk of experiencing food insecurity.

Investing in food—its growth, distribution, and supply—is never just about the food itself. Food is health. It’s community. It’s about rights and responsibilities, the environment and livelihoods. It’s about culture and the unique preferences of every individual sharing this planet. Most of all, it invites us to confront tough questions about the kind of society we want to build—and why.

As sleepy eyes and tired bodies sank into bus seats on the ride back to Petersburg, there was a sense of hope—hope that we had taken one more step toward preparing the next generation of food, agriculture, and natural resource thought-leaders.

The Dept of Agriculture at VSU plans on returning to the Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows in fall 2025. To learn more please contact Dr. Neil Brown, Assistant Professor, VSU College of Agriculture for details (nbrown@vsu.edu)

Inspiring the Next Generation: Kendall Rae Johnson's Agriculture & Youth Empowerment Tour

Briana Stevenson, NUag coordinator, National Urban Agriculture Initiative



Kendall Rae visits the Randolph Farm hydroponics lab to explore the connection between fish and plant health

Kendall Rae Johnson, the youngest certified farmer and NUag's new Youth Ambassador, made a big impact at Virginia State University's 2025 AgFest. She sold out of her My Farm Biz books while hosting a farmers market table with her family, selling books, merchandise, teas, honey, and more. As part of her 1890 tour, Kendall visited several community organizations and local urban farms across the Petersburg area. She kicked off her tour at Virginia State, making stops at Dream Tech Academy, the Petersburg Public Library, Petersburg Oasis Youth Farm, and Sankofa Community Orchard.

Kendall also spent the day with students from Carver Elementary School, playing a life-sized board game, Harvest Heroes, created by local youth extension leaders involved in the MANRRS program. The game introduced students to growing practices and agribusiness principles in a fun and interactive way. The students wrapped up their visit with a tour of Randolph Farm, where they met some of our dedicated and inspiring extension agents.

Kendall Rae Johnson is a remarkable young trailblazer in the world of agriculture, now embarking on a national tour to raise awareness and provide education on financial literacy, urban farming practices, and USDA youth loans. The goal is to spark interest and enthusiasm around economic and community development.

Kendall Rae and her team will visit several 1890 land-grant institutions—including Virginia State, Tennessee State, Southern University A&M, Prairie View A&M, and South Carolina State—to engage communities and inspire youth to explore agricultural career pathways. The tour aims to strengthen connections between university educators, local schools, 4-H programs, and small businesses, promoting urban collaboration and innovation.

Activities will include farm tours, hands-on workshops, interactive games, book readings, and more. The tour will spotlight Kendall Rae's book *I'm Growing Places* and her youth curriculum, *My Farm Biz*, which introduces young people to USDA loan programs and the fundamentals of agribusiness strategy.

You can catch Kendall spreading knowledge to youth across the nation at the following tour stops:

- **Tennessee State University: May 26–30**
- **Southern University A&M: June 5–11**
- **Prairie View A&M: June 30–July 4**
- **South Carolina State University: July 9–16**



Kendall Rae visits the Randolph Farm hydroponics lab to explore the connection between fish and plant health

TO READ MORE ON
OUR WEBSITE

SCAN ME



The Basics of Beekeeping: Learning to Protect Our Future

Ben Dukes, Program Assistant



Ben Dukes

There are very few things in this world that can or will prepare you for the experiences that you will have discovering the art of beekeeping. Reading a book or attending a local bee club meeting may help you to an extent, but hands-on, immersive exposure is optimal for truly understanding how to care for and raise bees.

In April, close to 40 participants were buzzing with excitement at Randolph Farm, eager to learn the basics of beekeeping from Keith Tignor, Virginia State Apiarist, during the full day Beginning Beekeeping workshop sponsored by the Small Farm Outreach Program.

The early morning presentation included an introduction to honeybee basics, biology and morphology (characteristics of the bees' body), styles of beehives and beekeeping equipment. A mid-morning break provided an opportunity for attendees to visit various tables with jars for winter feeding, beekeeping veils, jackets, and gloves as well as hive smokers, and other tools. After the break, we talked about the important topic of hive management and apiary location (especially for small backyard settings) as well as seasonal maintenance.

The highlight of the workshop was the visit to the Randolph Farm apiary. Established in 2008, the apiary has served as an outdoor classroom for many workshops and activities that feature these incredible pollinators. Once participants donned their bee suits for the hands-on portion of the workshop, Mr. Tignor, along with beekeepers,

Keith Caleb and Hollee Freeman proceeded to identify beehive components, inspection techniques, and colony composition to participants at the hives in small groups.

The afternoon ended with a session where participants assembled hive bodies and frames. Participants also engaged in a demonstration of how to use beekeeping apparatus. Attendees were encouraged to become acclimated to the safety and other beekeeping tools provided for managing honeybees.

Deborah Forbes, a flower farmer in Wakefield, VA, remarked, "Honeybees are critical to our food supply chain and the ecology where I farm. I believe that protecting them means protecting our future. One way I can do that is by becoming a beekeeper and integrating them into my farm operations." Forbes thinking reflects a growing awareness among small-scale farmers of the vital connection between pollinator health and long-term farm resilience.

Keith Tignor will present two additional beekeeping workshops at Randolph Farm this year. These workshops will include intermediate and advanced courses of instruction. Be sure to check the SFOP calendar in July and October for more information.



Ben Dukes

From Diagnosis to Solutions: Empowering Small Farmers and Gardeners with Plant Health Knowledge

Zelalem Mersha Ph.D., Associate Research Professor and Extension Specialist in IPM.



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What's wrong with my plant and how do I fix it?" These are the most frequent questions I encounter in my role at Virginia State University. Whether in rural farms or urban gardens, growers share a common urgency to protect their plants. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) offers science-based solutions, emphasizing prevention, observation and multiple control strategies, from cultural and mechanical to biological and chemical when necessary. I often refer to it as the "Little Hammers" or "Toolbox" approach rather than relying on one solution.

Plants, like people, can fall ill for many reasons: some biotic caused by pathogens like fungi, bacteria, viruses, or nematodes while others are abiotic arising from stressors such as drought, nutrient imbalances (e.g. calcium deficiency causing blossom end rot), or improper management (e.g. overwatering or poor drainage). Given this diversity, no one person or product can claim to have all the answers. Therefore, one of the most practical pieces of wisdom I consistently share is the importance of knowing where to seek help and accessing reliable sources.

My research and outreach over the past few years has focused on identifying economically important diseases in specialty and niche crops and in developing a sound IPM strategy to mitigate crop losses.

Sentinel plots established at Randolph Farm were instrumental in monitoring and providing early alerts to cucurbit growers about cucumber downy mildew. Amongst the list of recently characterized diseases are Fusarium yellows and rhizome rot on ginger, southern blight and head blight diseases on hemp.

My extension efforts include hands-on training as well as promoting user-friendly digital diagnostic tools and field-based ID educational support materials which offer a visual diagnostic hint for growers and gardeners. In today's digital era, the use of wireless microscopes to ID minute arthropods has also seen a growing interest as I also witnessed during recent events involving the youth and the public at large.

For support around diagnosis and solutions, contact your county extension office or the Plant Diagnostic Clinic at Virginia Tech via email at clinic@vt.edu or phone (540) 231-8020).

USDA-NIFA Crop Protection and Pest Management, Extension Implementation Program (EIP) funded project (Virginia IPM EIP Project Award Number 2024-7000-643-753)



Zelalem Mersha Ph.D.

You can also contact me at:

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SFOP Workshops: July–September 2025

Date	Workshop	Time	Location	PA	Limit
7/1/25	All About Peanuts	10:00am–11:00am	online	Dukes	
7/1/25	Savor the Flavor - American Lamb & Goat Meat	12:00pm–1:00pm	online	Fletcher	
7/2/25	Guerrilla Marketing Techniques	2:00pm–4:00pm	Randolph Farm Pavilion	Gibson	
7/9/25	Agriculture Community Outreach	2:00pm–5:00pm	Campbell County VCE Office, 163 Kabler Lane, Rustburg, VA	Hobbs	50
7/9/25	New Innovative Approach to Hydroponics	10:00am–11:30am	1355 Afton Grove Rd., Kenbridge, VA	Estes	15
7/11/25	Introduction to Bokashi Composting	12:00pm–1:30pm	Randolph Farm Pavilion	Gooden	25
7/15/25	Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction Tour	9:00am–11:00am	2839 Lumber Mill Road, Dayton, VA	Dalke	
7/16/25	Choosing the right Business Structure	6:30pm–8:00pm	online	Terrell	

SFOP Workshops: July–September 2025

Date	Workshop	Time	Location	PA	Limit
7/16/25	Wildlife Predator Prevention	2:00pm–4:00pm	Randolph Farm Pavilion	Gibson	
7/16/25	Small Farm Orientation	1:00pm–3:00pm	17100 Monument Cir, Suite B, Isle of Wight, Va & online	Dukes	
	Market Farm Garden Tour	5:30pm–7:30pm	15267 James Madison Pwy, King George, VA	Carter	25
7/17/25	Community Garden Startup	5:00pm–7:00pm	25131 Ruther Glen Rd., Ruther Glen, VA	Carter	
7/19/25	Meet the KuneKune – A Great Homestead Pig!	1:00pm–4:00pm	5620 East River Road, Foster, VA	Gooden	
7/21/25	Piedmontese Cattle	9:30am–11:30am	2300 Carolina Rd, Chesapeake, VA	Dukes	
7/22/25	Farm To Table Cooking	10:00am–12:00pm	316 N. Main Street, Chase City, VA	Johnson	20
7/24/25	Grow Your CEA Agri-Business Mindset with CropKing	11:00am–12:30pm	Jessica A Moore Foundation Community Center/408 School Street Waverly, VA	Bugg	
8/1/25	Mushroom Cultivation Workshop and Demonstration	10:30am–12:30pm	Sussex County Extension Office, 233 L.South County Drive, Waverly, VA	Bugg	
8/2/25	Coop Camp – Chicks & Chickens, Care & Harvesting	9:30am–4:00pm	5620 East River Road, Foster, VA	Gooden	
8/5/25	Southside Sustainable Agriculture Tour	9:30am–12:30pm	Charlotte Court House/137 Vincent Store Rd, Hwy 47, VA	Estes	
8/12/25	Profitable Roots – Solar Possibilities	6:00pm–8:00pm	Carter Farm, Unionville, VA	Carter	
8/12/25	Maximizing Tax strategies and Grant Funding Opportunities	6:30pm–8:00pm	online	Terrell	
8/13/25	Farm and Farm Equipment Safety	5:00pm–7:00pm	Carter Farm, Unionville, VA	Carter	20
8/13/25	Digital Roots: Computer Literacy for Farmer	2:00pm–4:00pm	Prince George Public Library, Prince George, VA	Bugg	
8/13/25	No Waste Cooking	10:00am–12:00pm	316 N. Main Street, Chase City, VA	Johnson	30
8/13/25	Agricultural Finance, Tax and Asset Protection (AgFTAP)	7:00pm–8:00pm	online	Dukes	
8/13/25	Irrigation Workshop	2:00pm–5:00pm	Nelson County TBA	Hobbs	
8/13/25	Farm ATV Safety	6:00pm–8:00pm	Carter Farm, Unionville, VA	Carter	
8/13/25	Kunekune Pigs	9:00am–11:30am	Randolph Farm Pavilion	Dukes	
8/14/25	Shenandoah Valley Young Farmers Coalition	6:00pm–8:00pm	Chappy Poff Farm/5482 Williams Run Road, Rockingham, VA	Dalke	
8/19/25	Small Farm Orientation	6:00pm–8:00pm	online	Dukes	
8/20/25	Biosecurity – Tips for Protecting Your Farm from Unwanted Visitors	12:00pm–1:00pm	online	Fletcher	
8/23/25	Drip Irrigation	10:00am–12:00pm	26230 Orange Spring Rd., Unionville, VA	Terrell	
8/26/25	Increasing your value by telling your story	6:30pm–8:00pm	Carter Farm, Unionville, VA	Carter	
9/3/25	New Innovative Approach to Hydroponics	10:00am–11:30am	1355 Afton Grove Rd, Kenbridge, 23944	Estes	
9/3/25	The Agribusiness Way	10:00am–12:00pm	Randolph Farm Pavilion	Gibson	
9/4/25	Sunn Hemp & Cotton: From Forage to Fashion	11:00am–1:00pm	212 Spring Branch Road, Waverly, VA	Bugg	
9/9/15	Information and Techniques to help Small Farmers In their Farming Operations	3:00pm–5:00pm	Randolph Farm Pavilion	Summers	
9/14/25	Family and Farm Day	9:00am–2:00pm	VA Tech Southern Piedmont AREC/2375 2375 Darvills Road, Blackstone, VA	Bugg	
9/17/25	Information Session for the Beginning Small Farmer	1:00pm–3:00pm	Carver Research Center/9432 N James Madison Hwy., Rapidan, VA	Terrell	20
9/23/25	Planning and Benefits of Silvopasture in Livestock Production	3:00pm–5:00pm	Randolph Farm Pavilion	Gibson	
9/24/25	Sheep & Goat Fall Field Day	12:30pm–4:00pm	18235 Limestone Drive, Meadowview, VA	Fletcher	
9/24/25	Fruit Production Planning Workshop	10:00am–12:00pm	Nelson County TBA	Hobbs	
9/25/25	Edamame Harvest and Taste Event	1:30pm–5:00pm	Randolph Farm Pavilion	Gibson	
9/27/25	High Tunnel Maintenance and Layout	10:00am–12:00pm	Carver Research Center/9432 N James Madison Hwy., Rapidan, VA	Terrell	20



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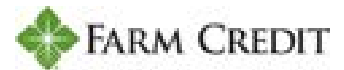
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