

ANIMAL- HERDS

NEWSLETTER



Greetings from Our HERD Leaders



Welcome to the inaugural edition of our newsletter! As Extension Systems Leader, I am pleased to connect with producers, agricultural professionals, and partners across Virginia.

Our Animal Systems Extension program delivers practical, research-based education

to improve livestock productivity, profitability, and sustainability. While maintaining focus on hair sheep production, we are expanding support for Virginia's beef cattle industry through data-driven management, precision technologies, and decision-support tools. Key priorities include improving herd and flock performance, promoting innovative management practices, strengthening veterinary and One Health partnerships, and creating value-added opportunities for producers.

We are also advancing efforts to revitalize the Meat Processing Unit (MPU) as a hub for education, workforce development, and producer support. This initiative will strengthen regional meat supply chains and expand access to processing and marketing resources.

Through this newsletter, we will share program updates, educational opportunities, research findings, producer success stories, and practical resources. Thank you for being part of our Extension community. We look forward to working with you to advance animal agriculture in Virginia.



Welcome to this exciting new chapter for animal research at Virginia State University. As Research Systems Leader, I am pleased to share our vision for advancing innovative, science-based approaches that strengthen livestock systems, with a growing

emphasis on our new beef cattle program alongside continued work in hair sheep.

Our efforts are centered on developing resilient and efficient production systems through integrated research and applied innovation. Key focus areas include utilizing silvopasture systems to mitigate heat stress and improve animal comfort, advancing the use of probiotics to support animal health and performance, and exploring solar grazing systems that optimize the interaction between livestock and forage resources. While these approaches will benefit both cattle and sheep systems, a significant emphasis will be placed on building and supporting our emerging beef cattle program.

Through these initiatives, we aim to enhance productivity, animal well-being, and environmental sustainability. We look forward to sharing our progress and working closely with producers, partners, and stakeholders as we continue to build a strong and forward-looking livestock research program at VSU.

What is HERDS?

Animal – HERDS

The acronym HERDS was developed at VSU to represent the integrated research, extension, and teaching animal systems program within the College of Agriculture. It stands for **Animal Health, Efficiency, Reproduction, and Data analytics Systems** (Animal – HERDS). The mission of Animal HERDS is to advance the sustainability and productivity of livestock systems through needs-based applied research, innovative extension programming, and hands-on experiential learning, leveraging smart technologies and data-driven tools to equip farmers and students with practical, science-based solutions.

Meet the Herd



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Dr. Stephan Wildeus is a Professor in the College of Agriculture, Assistant Research Director, and Research Lead for Animal-HERDS at Virginia State University (VSU), where he provides leadership for integrated livestock research programs within the Agricultural Research Station. He holds a Ph.D. in animal reproduction from James Cook University (Australia), a B.Sc. in Animal Science from Montana State University, and completed postdoctoral training at Texas A&M University. His graduate and early career research focused on beef cattle reproduction. Dr. Wildeus came to VSU in 1992 from the University of the Virgin Islands, where he conducted research with beef cattle and hair sheep. At VSU, he set up the small ruminant and alpaca research programs, developed sustainable small ruminant production systems, refined assisted reproductive technologies, and advanced breed preservation. Dr. Wildeus has served on a number of editorial boards and been invited to present his research nationally and internationally.



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Dr. Dahlia O'Brien is a Professor in the College of Agriculture, Small Ruminant Specialist in Cooperative Extension, and Extension Lead for Animal-HERDS at Virginia State University (VSU). She holds a M.S. in Reproductive Physiology and a PhD in Food Science/Animal Production from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore. Dr. O'Brien came to VSU from Delaware State University in 2013. At VSU, Dr. O'Brien's extension and applied research interests lie in developing sustainable, forage-based production systems for small ruminants by integrating parasite control, reproductive management, and mobile processing solutions to improve animal health, productivity, and producer viability. She is currently managing Virginia's first USDA-Inspected Mobile Processing Unit. She serves on several consortiums/committees, including the American Consortium for Small Ruminant Parasite Control (ACSRPC). In her current role, she provides leadership for Animal-HERDS by guiding animal and livestock Extension programming across the state.



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Dr. Eunice Ndegwa is an Associate Professor of Animal Health at Virginia State University (VSU) and a member of the Animal-HERDS Research Program. She earned a PhD in veterinary biomedical sciences at Auburn University. Her research interest is on animal health, public health and pre-harvest animal food product safety using a One Health approach. Dr. Ndegwa leads a collaborative research program aimed at developing sustainable strategies to improve livestock health and productivity, mitigating zoonoses, antimicrobial resistance, and animal-related foodborne pathogens while ensuring improved animal products' nutritional quality. She is interested in engaging and educating producers and the general public on One health issues at the intersection of livestock-human-environment interactions, creating awareness and strategies for mitigation. She is a dedicated Instructor at VSU Department of Agriculture and a research mentor actively engaging undergraduate and graduate students in workforce skill acquisition and graduate study preparation.



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Dr. Bom Harris, DVM is the Attending Veterinarian and Director of Animal Health Management. Dr. Bom Harris, DVM, has been a practicing livestock veterinarian in Central and Eastern Virginia since graduating from the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine at Virginia Tech in 2008. She founded Old Dominion Veterinary Services in 2016. The practice serves over 20 counties and specializes in ruminant medicine, including dairy and beef cattle and small ruminants. Dr. Harris is active in her community, with a focus on producer and 4H education. She serves on the board of the Virginia Academy of Food Animal Practitioners (President, 2013-14), the Virginia Veterinary Medical Association, and Virginia Agriculture in the Classroom (Chairperson, 2025 to 2027). She joined Virginia State University in 2025 as Attending Veterinarian and Director of Animal Health Management. Dr. Harris is passionate about promoting agriculture and empowering agricultural producers to succeed.



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Dr. Jarvis Scott is a Research Scientist and Livestock Performance & Technical Solutions Leader at Virginia State University (VSU), where he leads cattle research initiatives within the Agricultural Research Station. His work focuses on advancing livestock productivity, efficiency, and sustainability through applied research and science-based management strategies. Dr. Scott brings a strong background in ruminant nutrition and production systems, with expertise in feed efficiency, rumen function, and environmentally sustainable livestock production practices. He earned his Ph.D. in Animal Nutrition from the University of Maryland-College Park and a M.S. degree in Animal Nutrition from Tuskegee University. Previously, Dr. Scott served as a Senior Scientist in Ruminant Technical Innovation at Purina Mills, where he led research and product development efforts aimed at improving animal performance, welfare, and sustainability. At VSU, Dr. Scott is committed to developing practical, research-driven solutions for producers, mentoring students, and strengthening cattle research programs across the region.

HERDS Technical Staff



Left to right: Justin Cain (Technician), Aaryn Davis (Technician), Jessica Queen (Technician), Amanda Lewis (Senior Technician), Graceanne Burton (Technician), Adrian Oglesby (Technician), and Mackenzie Spencer (Animal Systems Unit Manager)

HERDS Update

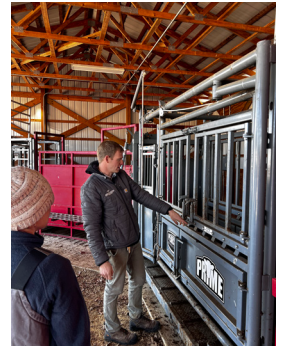


VSU faculty members with William Golightly (Superintendent, Middleburg AREC)

Animal Systems faculty recently visited several Virginia Tech Agricultural Research and Extension Centers (ARECs) to engage with local teams and evaluate current programs. Middleburg and Shenandoah Valley ARECs were a part of these visits and were facilitated through the superintendents at both sites. The visits focused on discussions surrounding cattle breed selection, identifying key research and extension priorities, and assessing cattle facility design to support applied research, extension, and teaching. These interactions provided valuable opportunities to align efforts across locations and ensure that facilities and programming effectively meet the evolving needs of producers and the industry.



VSU faculty members with Dr. Gabriel Pent (Former Superintendent, Shenandoah AREC)

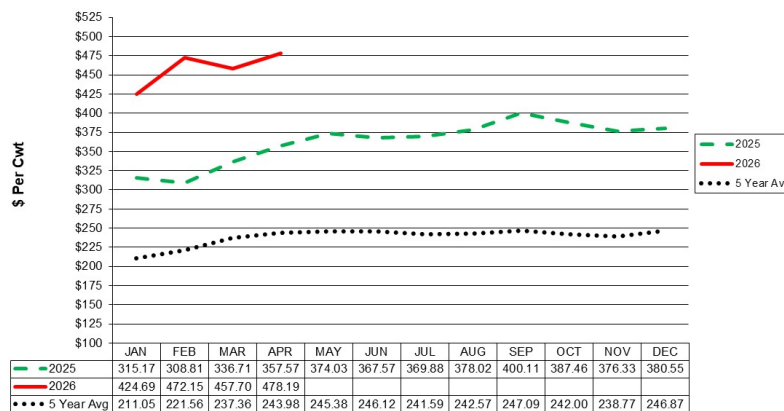


Marketing Outlook

Virginia Feeder Cattle Market Update – May 2026.

By Brerr Richardson (Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences – Virginia Market News Service)

Virginia feeder cattle prices are at record high levels for many grade and weight classes. April 2026 Virginia feeder cattle prices are over 30% higher than last year and are nearly double the five-year average. Low cattle inventories are the primary reason for the high feeder cattle prices we are currently experiencing. National cattle inventories have been declining in recent years due in large part to drought conditions that forced producers to downsize their herds. The USDA January 2026 Cattle Inventory report shows that the cattle inventory was the lowest since 1951. The January inventory has declined nearly 8% since 2021 and is over 11% lower than 25 years ago. The graph below compares current Virginia feeder cattle prices to the 5-year average:



Unfortunately, the drought conditions we are currently experiencing are only making the situation worse. It is important to keep in mind that despite the high prices, cattle producers are facing difficult situations – primarily high input costs, limited hay supplies, poor grazing conditions and lack of water. The drought conditions and lighter than normal hay supplies are prohibiting livestock producers from rebuilding their herds and it is very unlikely we will see significant increases in inventories in the near term.

Given the current hay situation, VDACS Virginia Market News Service is trying to find sources of hay for livestock producers through the [Virginia Hay Clearing House](https://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/markets-and-finance-market-news-hay-ad.shtml) publication. Producers who have hay to sell can place a free listing in the Hay Clearing House online at: www.vdacs.virginia.gov/markets-and-finance-market-news-hay-ad.shtml or by emailing market.news@vdacs.virginia.gov or calling (804) 786-3947.

Infrastructure Upgrades

Current upgrades to the sheep hub reflect a strategic pivot to better integrate research and extension programming, beginning with a redesign of the management system to develop larger, more uniform cohorts of animals suitable for applied technology studies. The flock will also play a key role in emerging silvopasture and solar grazing projects, with breeding and lambing schedules aligned closely with research and teaching timelines and objectives. In tandem with these programmatic changes, significant facility improvements are underway, including renovation of pens and handling areas to enhance efficiency and animal welfare, as well as the establishment of a dedicated teaching and demonstration lab to support hands-on learning and outreach activities.



HERDS Extension



Livestock extension is undergoing a strategic transformation to better serve livestock producers, students, and agricultural professionals through a more integrated and technology-driven approach. This new direction centers on a Livestock Enterprise Systems framework that connects production, management, and marketing while emphasizing needs-based applied research, extension programming, and hands-on experiential learning. Key program expansions so far include an enhanced multi-species webinar series, the creation of fact sheets, and increased cattle and sheep applied research collaborations and on-farm projects. In addition, plans are underway to launch a biennial Animal-HERDS Field Day to further strengthen producer engagement, research dissemination, and stakeholder outreach. Central to this evolution is a strong commitment to expanding hands-on experiential learning through demonstration farms, positioning Animal HERDS as a leader in innovative, technology-integrated Extension programming that bridges research and practice.

Herds Research (Grants Submitted)



Several new and pending research projects are advancing innovative approaches to sustainable livestock production systems. Current efforts include evaluating smart farming technologies to optimize mixed-species grazing in silvopasture systems (McIntire-Stennis funding: J. Scott, PI and co-PIs D. O'Brien and S. Wildeus), as well as comparing artificial shade and silvopasture strategies to reduce heat stress in cattle (Evans-Allen funding: J. Scott, PI, and co-PIs S. Wildeus and D. O'Brien). Additional projects are exploring the use of probiotics and postbiotics as nutraceutical tools to improve animal health in integrated systems (Evans-Allen funding: E. Ndegwa PI), and assessing agrivoltaic (solar grazing) systems to understand their impacts on livestock performance, soil health, and energy production (Evans-Allen funding: S. Wildeus and D. O'Brien, PIs). Together, these projects highlight a strong focus on integrating technology, environmental stewardship, and animal well-being to enhance productivity and resilience in livestock operations.

Research Highlight

“Moo”ving to a New Era: VSU-ARS Launches the First Registered South Poll Research Herd on a University Campus

Dr. Jarvis Scott, Research Scientist and Livestock Performance & Technical Solutions Leader



Virginia State University's Agricultural Research Station has aligned its research programs with the evolving needs of livestock producers across the Commonwealth. These strategic shifts have strengthened the station's focus on applied research in beef cattle production, recognizing the sector's significant economic and agricultural importance. According to recent USDA Economic Research Service data, cattle and calf receipts rank as the second-largest agricultural commodity, generating approximately \$712 million in annual revenue, surpassed only by the broiler industry, which accounts for roughly \$1.25 billion. In response to this importance and to further support producer success and industry advancement, Virginia State University launched a dedicated beef cattle research program and appointed Dr. Jarvis Scott to lead these efforts. This program is designed to deliver innovative, producer-focused solutions that enhance animal performance, improve resilience to emerging challenges such as heat stress, and strengthen the sustainability of cattle operations across Virginia.

Randolph Farm has established a foundational herd of locally sourced South Poll cattle to support the development of a new beef cattle research and extension program. Growing interest in regenerative agriculture and rotational grazing systems has led many small- to mid-sized producers (15–99 head) to adopt this breed as a low-input, forage-based production option. South Poll cattle are a composite breed developed from four *Bos taurus* breeds, namely the Barzona, Hereford, Senepol, and Red Angus. By exclusively using *Bos taurus* genetics, the breed was intentionally selected to avoid common production challenges such as late maturity, disposition, and inconsistent carcass quality associated with *Bos indicus* breeds.

The resulting South Poll breed is characterized by moderate frame size, docility, excellent feed efficiency, and strong carcass quality, making it particularly well suited for grass-finished systems. South Poll cattle have been specifically developed to consistently produce high-quality, tender beef on strict forage-based diets. In addition, the breed exhibits exceptional heat tolerance, supported in part by its slick hair coat, allowing animals to maintain performance under high-temperature and humid conditions typical of the southeastern and midwestern US. These combined traits make South Poll cattle an ideal model for evaluating sustainable, regenerative grazing systems that prioritize animal welfare, environmental adaptation, and efficient beef production.

For these reasons, Animal-HERDS research has launched the first institutional effort dedicated specifically to South Poll cattle. The primary objective of this program is to evaluate and highlight the performance, heat tolerance, and resilience of South Poll cattle in low-input forage systems.

To support a data-driven approach, the herd will be equipped with advanced precision livestock technologies, including smart boluses, smart ear tags, and virtual fencing collars. These tools will enable continuous monitoring of movement and welfare indicators such as body temperature, water intake, rumination activity, grazing behavior, and overall productivity. By integrating real-time data collection with the pasture management system, this research will provide valuable insight into how heat-resilient or red-hide cattle perform under environmental stress while maintaining efficiency and animal well-being.

Vet Corner

Adapting to Antibiotic Regulation Changes on the Farm

Dr. Bom Harris, Attending Veterinarian and Director of Animal Health Management



Although the regulations have been in place for several years, producers still reach out with questions about changes to over-the-counter status of various animal health products. In June 2023, FDA Guidance 623 effectively moved all medically important over the counter (OTC) veterinary antibiotics to prescription status. The primary antibiotics affected by this change, penicillin, oxytetracycline, and certain intra-mammary mastitis drugs, were previously widely available in feed stores. Federal rules regulating antibiotics administered to animals in feed or water went into effect earlier. Since 2017, a Veterinary Feed Directive (VFD) has been required to purchase, feed, or store medically important antibiotics to be administered to food-producing animals through feed or water. Although a VFD is not a prescription, there are similarities in the reasons behind these regulatory changes, as well as their collective impact on farmers. Both changes apply only to antibiotics important in human medicine with the intention of reducing the development of antimicrobial resistance.

All drugs have labels indicating the species it is labelled for, the dose, duration/frequency, route of administration, and withholding for food-producing animals. Veterinarians can use drugs in an extra-label manner with certain restrictions. However, VFDs cannot be written extra-label. The feed-grade antibiotic used most in Virginia is chlortetracycline, which is labeled for the treatment and/or prevention of bacterial enteritis, pneumonia, and anaplasmosis in cattle (there are other indications in swine, poultry, and sheep). Chlortetracycline was commonly fed in the past to treat pinkeye or foot rot outbreaks in cattle. This extra-label use is no longer legal. Non-medically important antibiotics, such as ionophores (e.g., Rumensin), and non-antibiotic veterinary products, such as vaccines, were not impacted by these regulatory changes.

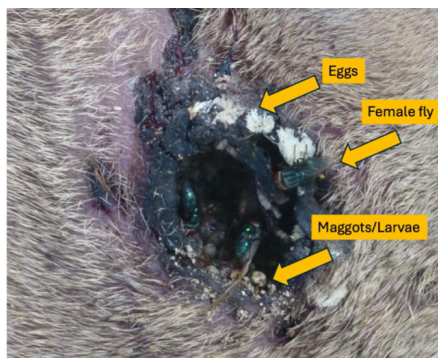
Prescription medication can only be legally dispensed or used in the context of a valid veterinary-client-patient relationship (VCPR). VFDs also require a VCPR. A VCPR requires a farm visit to establish the relationship and typically requires an in-person visit at least annually thereafter. The veterinarian takes responsibility for treatment decisions for the farm and must be available for emergency care.

An established relationship with a veterinarian might allow medication to be dispensed without a farm visit when appropriate. For some farms, it can also be appropriate for the veterinarian to dispense bottles of prescription drugs to have on hand for future use. This is because the established VCPR makes the veterinarian familiar with the producer and the producer's abilities to both evaluate and safely treat an animal. They know the animals and the farm environment, including restraint facilities, exposure to other animals, and intended use. They understand the producer's knowledge of food safety and human safety when handling animals and medication. This context makes it possible for the veterinarian to make a medically appropriate decision specific to the farm and producer and determine whether a farm visit is needed.

Although increased regulation is rarely a welcome change, these drugs are indeed critically important to human medicine. The loss of OTC access has not adversely impacted animal health or welfare. Many of these drugs were previously used at ineffective dosing or duration when purchased OTC. This drives antimicrobial resistance but additionally fails to address the health issue of the patient. Moreover, drugs were often chosen based on OTC availability rather than knowledge of the best drug for the condition being treated. The change to prescription status has led to more effective drug choices with no significant change in cost to producers. With a profound shortage of food animal veterinarians in many parts of our country, maintaining a relationship with local veterinarian(s) puts a farm in the optimal position for maximizing animal health, both through preventative and emergency care. Access to prescription drugs is just one small piece of that relationship.

What producers should know about New World Screw Worm

Bom Harris, Director, Animal Health Management and Attending Veterinarian, Virginia State University



New world screw worm (NWS; *Cochliomyia hominivorax*) was confirmed in multiple Texas cattle in June of 2026. NWS has been eradicated from the U.S., Mexico, and most of Central America since 1966 although there have been sporadic outbreaks since 2006, including an outbreak in the Florida Keys from 2016 to 2017. Officials have been battling the northward progress of NWS since it pushed north of Panama in 2023. Control measures primarily involve quarantine, animal movement restriction, surveillance, and sterile insect technique (SIT). SIT is the release of sterile male flies which disrupt the lifecycle of the screwworm and has been successfully used to eradicate NWS from North America in the past.

Fly larvae (maggots) of most flies consume dead or damaged tissue. In contrast, NWS larvae consume live, healthy tissue. The larvae burrow deep into tissue causing severe damage, pain, and possibly death if untreated. NWS spreads through the natural movement of flies, but most importantly through animal movement, including wildlife, livestock, pets, and even humans.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is working aggressively to contain this threat and continuing to ramp up the SIT program. NWS will likely be identified in more areas before the outbreak is controlled, with potential for economic challenges due to movement and trade restrictions. However, it is important to keep in mind that the U.S. food supply is safe. Screwworms do not infest meat, dairy, or produce.

Producer vigilance with rapid reporting and response will be imperative to minimize the spread of NWS. Be aware of the appearance of both the fly and the larvae, as well as the symptoms of infestation in animals. Drugs for treatment and prevention of NWS have been approved through emergency use authorization for livestock and companion animals. If you suspect NWS infestation in your pets or livestock, contact your veterinarian immediately, as well as the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) Office of Veterinary Services at 804-786-2483.

Know the signs:

- **Adult flies:** Metallic blue/green body with 3 dark stripes along the back. Orange eyes
- **Larvae:** May be hundreds or thousands within days of infestation. Creamy white with protruding spines around a tapered body (like a screw). Turn inkish red in 7 days and drop to ground to complete life cycle.
- **Clinical symptoms:** Visible larvae/eggs around wound or orifices (navel, nose, ears, genitals); odor of decay; wounds that enlarge/deepen; irritation (headshaking, rubbing); pain, lethargy, isolation, poor appetite.

What if I suspect screwworm on/in animals?



Contact your veterinarian, state vet, USDA office, or extension agent



Seek treatment for your animal ASAP



Keep your animal in a safe contained space



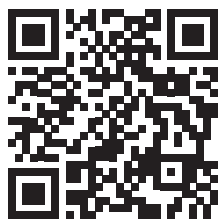
Spray down potentially infested areas with pesticide insect sprays



Collect any maggots and save in rubbing alcohol



Wear gloves to protect yourself



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VIRGINIA STATE College of Agriculture

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Academics Corner

TEACHING FACULTY



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Dr. Neil E. Brown is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Agriculture and serves as Special Assistant to the Dean for Academic Innovation at Virginia State University (VSU). He earned his M.S. in Animal and Poultry Sciences from Tuskegee University and his Ph.D. in Dairy and Animal Science from Penn State University, where his research focused on precision agriculture strategies to reduce ammonia and greenhouse gas emissions from dairy production systems. Following his doctoral studies, he expanded his scholarly interests to include sustainability and human-environment interactions through work in Penn State's Department of Geography. He subsequently taught sustainability-related courses at the University of Pittsburgh, Duquesne University, and Chatham University while he served as Director of Community Engagement and Education for an environmental justice nonprofit. At VSU, Dr. Brown teaches animal science and environmental science courses, advises student clubs, leads experiential learning initiatives, and cultivates partnerships focused on workforce development opportunities in agriculture, technology, and emerging industries.



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Dr. Jada Q. Bing is an Assistant Professor specializing in Animal Science and Agriculture Education. She earned her Ph.D. in Animal Science from North Carolina State University in 2012. In her current role, Dr. Bing is dedicated to student development, serving as an advisor to Animal Science and Agriculture Education majors while also mentoring students as co-advisor to the VSU chapter of MANRRS. She further supports student engagement as the on-campus advisor to the undergraduate chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. Dr. Bing teaches a range of courses designed to prepare students for careers in animal and agricultural sciences, including Principles of Animal Science (100-level), Introduction to Sustainable Agriculture and Society (100-level), Principles of Poultry Production (200-level), and Feeds and Feeding (400-level). Her teaching and mentorship emphasize both scientific knowledge and practical application, fostering student success in academic, professional, and leadership pursuits within the agricultural field.



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Dr. Adel Ghnenis is an Assistant Professor of Reproductive Physiology in the Department of Agriculture at Virginia State University. His research focuses on developmental programming in livestock, particularly how maternal nutrition, hormonal environments, and metabolic stress during pregnancy influence fetal development, postnatal growth, and long-term health in small ruminants. Through his work, he seeks to improve animal health, productivity, and sustainability in livestock systems. Dr. Ghnenis earned his Ph.D. in Animal and Veterinary Science with a specialization in Reproductive Physiology from the University of Wyoming. At Virginia State University, he teaches ANCS 140: Principles of Animal Science, ANCS 345: Veterinary Anatomy and Physiology, ANCS 447: Special Problems, and ANSC 448: Advanced Livestock Production. In addition to teaching, Dr. Ghnenis mentors undergraduate and graduate students, conducts research, pursues external funding opportunities, and contributes to extension and outreach programs that support livestock producers and workforce development.



In a Digital World, Do Students Still Want Dirt Under Their Boots?

Neil E. Brown, Ph.D. Department of Agriculture, Virginia State University

In a world buzzing with social media debates, artificial intelligence breakthroughs, and talk of lab grown meat, it's easy to wonder: What hands-on experiences still matter for the next generation of agricultural professionals? And maybe an even bigger question: do today's students actually want those real, in-the-field moments anymore?

These are the questions faculty at Virginia State University (VSU) have been asking. So, when the opportunity to partner with Cattle Run Farm LLC came along, they saw the perfect chance to give students a hands-on "day in the life of a producer" experience, one that goes beyond screens, lectures, and digital simulations that often define a classroom.

Cattle Run Farm LLC is operated by siblings Sarah and Ralph Morton, third-generation farmers carrying on the legacy of their family. Ralph, a military veteran, brings discipline, ingenuity, and grit to the farm. Sarah, a proud VSU graduate, brings both expertise and unique insights to agriculture and the strategies needed for the next generation to thrive in the agricultural sector.

When the vans arrived, students stepped into a world that was completely authentic. They were slow to adjust at first but were soon energized as they harvested chickens and learned how to cut the meat into sections that one might see at the grocery store. They dewormed and vaccinated goats, castrated and vaccinated pigs, and explored the daily operations involving cattle, rabbits, bees, berries, and more.

Animal science major Milan Martin summed it up best when she stated, ***"Mr. Ralph's experiences highlighted his expertise, and his ability to teach alongside his crafty setups made the visit worthwhile."***

For Jocelyn Matthews, the day was not only educational. Years earlier, she had participated in a 4-H program at Cattle Run Farm. An experience that helped inspire her decision to pursue animal science at VSU. Returning as a college student made the experience even more meaningful.

"My favorite part was definitely getting to catch the pigs, even though they were fast. Learning that doing something like castration is much simpler than it sounds," Jocelyn shared.



Her words capture exactly why these real-world moments matter. Even as agriculture evolves with new tools and technologies, the heart of the field still grows from hands-on experiences. Not only do students need these moments, they want them. And at places like Cattle Run Farm, those experiences are doing more than teaching skills, they are awakening passions, sparking confidence, and shaping futures one unforgettable experience at a time.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AT RANDOLPH FARM





|Imani Bradhams



|Destiny Epps

Congrats **SPRING** **TO OUR HERDS GRADUATES** **2026**



|Christen Sellers



|Sade Omoare

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Producer Highlight

Bill Rogers, Hair sheep producer, Shenandoah County, VA

Can you tell us about your operation (location, size, breeds, and production focus)?

I run 225 head of sheep on several farm properties in Shenandoah County, developed from an initial flock of 5 Barbados Blackbelly and 5 St. Croix pregnant ewes I acquired in December 2022. I give my sheep their best life ever before humanely culling them because a healthy, low-stress sheep provides the savoriest meat.



How did you get started in sheep production?

I attended the inaugural Mobile Processing Unit (MPU) program at VSU, which gave me tremendous hands-on experience with sheep carcass preparation, while also learning all aspects of running a sheep production operation. I love lamb dishes but was curious why there weren't more developed sheep operations in Shenandoah and surrounding counties, seeing this void as an opportunity to combine meat production with agritourism opportunities (who doesn't love bottle-feeding a lamb?).

How has VSU helped you?

Dr. O'Brien and Dr. Wildeus are exceptional mentors to both new and experienced sheep farmers because of their combined education and personal and professional experience with small ruminants. Whether operating as a hobby or for-profit operation, their in-person and online classes offer a wealth of practical information for aspiring or seasoned farmers. They are both also tremendously generous with their time when answering questions or providing advice.

What management practices have been most successful for you?

The two areas I have vastly improved in are nutrition and disease management. With the shrinking number of ruminant veterinarians, learning to keep my animals healthy and, if they do, appropriately treating their symptoms has significantly improved the overall health of my flock, mortality rates, and individual animal body condition.

What are some challenges you've faced, and how have you addressed them?

Lack of sufficient infrastructure (for a rapidly growing flock) and managed lambing seasons are the main challenges I have faced. While pasture birthing is typically uneventful in the Spring and Fall, weather extremes pose challenges for both the ewe and lamb without adequate protection from the elements. To address these concerns, I have an approved cost-share project with my Soil and Water Conservation District under which I will be able to more-effectively divide my grazing pastures, improve my rotational grazing plan, and add additional watering stations.

Is there anything else you'd like fellow producers to know about your work or philosophy?

I feel a profound sense of privilege at having my flock and an obligation to treat all my livestock with dignity and respect so, when I harvest them, I want that spirit to flow into the quality of the cuts enjoyed by the consuming public, who have the assurance that each individual animal was raised responsibly and treated humanely.

