



RIDGE AND RIVER NEWS

The Newsletter of Rockbridge Conservation

February 2023

Concern about biosolids with “forever chemicals” continues

In recent years, various PFAS “forever chemicals” have been used in a growing number of consumer products. These chemicals do not break down in nature, build up over time in the bodies of people and animals, and have been linked to thyroid problems, immune system issues, decreased birth weights, and various types of cancer.

In June of 2022, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued new, non-enforceable health advisory limits for PFAS in drinking water, but it has yet to establish any limits for these chemicals in biosolids such as the processed sewage sludge applied on farm fields as fertilizer. This sludge often includes added landfill leachate, which is almost always high in PFAS.

The practice of applying biosolids on farmland is used throughout the country, and last year some of those communities, including areas of Maine and Michigan, have had to close down farms and wildlife areas after tests of the soil and water revealed dangerously high levels of PFAS.

Here in Rockbridge, there are a dozen farms that apply biosolids from the Maury Service Authority (MSA) and Rockingham County’s North River Sewage Treatment Plants, which accept landfill leachate. Some of these farms have applied biosolids to their fields for two decades.

Over the past year, Rockbridge Conservation’s PFAS committee has met with various community agencies and provided presentations on the PFAS problem to the MSA, authorities at the Rockbridge landfill, the local Extension Agent, and the Rockbridge Farm Bureau, focusing on concern about the local application of biosolids that have not been tested for PFAS.

At each of these meetings and presentations, the committee has recommended that the biosolids, the leachate, and the soil and water on land where the biosolids have been spread, be tested for PFAS levels. Over the last six months, members of this subcommittee have been working with Dr. Kang Xia, a professor at Virginia Tech, whose area of

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Board retirees honored



Retiring members of the RACC board included (from left) Kit Huffman, Larry Evans, and Gregg Amonette. Not shown are Bruce Bytnar and Brian Steffel.

See meeting story on Page 2.

What’s in a name?

Did you notice the change in the newsletter’s nameplate (top of this page)?

- While RACC is a monosyllabic acronym readily understood by many in our community, it fails to directly convey information to new people.
- The Board of Directors has therefore adopted “Rockbridge Conservation” as our public-facing handle without changing the original, legal name, Rockbridge Area Conservation Council.

Going forward, you will see Rockbridge Conservation in public communications, while RACC may appear in this newsletter and other messages for longtime members and organization insiders.

RACC hosts Annual Meeting with election and awards

Rockbridge Conservation (RACC) convened its Annual Meeting at Heartstone Lodge on Oct. 9, 2022. Pre-meeting activities included a visit to the new footbridge that carries the Chessie Trail across the South River, and exploration of Heartstone Lodge's Labyrinth. Participants brought wonderful food to share as a potluck meal, while drinks were provided.

Co-Presidents Bob Biersack and Eli Fishpaw presented summaries of the organization's many accomplishments in 2022, while Treasurer Larry Evans outlined RACC's financial status.

Retiring members of the Board of Directors were accorded a grateful farewell, including Gregg Amonette, Bruce Bytnar, Larry Evans, Kit Huffman, Brian Steffel and Julie Youngman; the presidents thanked them for their many years of service as board members, officers, committee chairs, and tireless volunteers. Four new board members were elected ([story](#), Page 3).

As ever, the high point of the meeting was the presentation of awards to people who have performed extraordinary work to further Rockbridge Conservation's long-term goals.

Sarah Coffey together with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation were presented with the "Conservation Impact Award" for implementing the Upper James Watershed Buffer Program, including the planting of over 14,000 trees that created more than 70 acres of forested buffers along streams, with plans to plant more.



Award winners at the Annual Meeting were, from left, Sarah Coffey, Charles Bodie, and Adrienne Hall-Bodie.

Adrienne Hall-Bodie and Charles Bodie each received a "Lifetime Conservationist Award" for more than 30 years of work for RACC beginning in 1986. They served many years on the board and as President (Charles) and Secretary (Adrienne). Adrienne also designed the current RACC logo.

David Hopkins was declared "Volunteer of the Year" for his leadership in protecting the waterways of Rockbridge County, and especially for his years-long, now successful effort to designate the entire Maury as a Scenic River. He received his award at a later ceremony celebrating the Scenic River designation.



David Hopkins received his award at a celebration of the Maury River's new status.

RACC expands 'Caught Green-Handed' award program

Rockbridge Conservation's Waste Prevention Committee is relaunching the Caught Green-Handed program, originally established by Main Street Lexington. The program has generous in-kind support from the News-Gazette.

Caught Green-Handed is a campaign to publicly recognize local businesses, community organizations, and institutions for significant actions they have taken to become more energy-efficient, reduce waste, or otherwise improve the environmental wellbeing of the greater Rockbridge community.

Committee members will identify candidates, confirm the beneficial impact of their actions, and publicize the awardees in social media and the News-Gazette. The newspaper has offered to reach out to local businesses to underwrite display ads to accompany the articles and photos that members of Rockbridge Conservation's Waste Prevention Committee will provide to document the efforts of those who have been Caught Green-Handed.

The committee plans to designate ten or more recipients for public recognition in 2023. They hope the campaign will go on indefinitely as RACC continues to recognize worthy recipients who are helping Rockbridge go green and inspire others to take action. The public is invited to email nominations to melody.tennant@rockbridgeconservation.org.

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RACC elects new board members

Three new members (photo below) were elected to Rockbridge Conservation's board at the Annual Meeting.

Sam Allen came to Lexington in 2006. He is a professor of economics at VMI, where he teaches and does research on a variety of microeconomic topics. Sam and his wife, Amy, have two children (Corinna, 14, and Elliott, 12). Sam has a range of interests, but especially values fresh air, mindful use of resources, and supporting his community.

Bonnie Bernstein worked in literacy programs and publishing before moving to Lexington in 2005. She then founded and directed the Early Education Program at Boxerwood and now serves on the board of the Boxerwood Educational Foundation. Bonnie is a Virginia Master Naturalist, a volunteer for Friends of the Chessie Trail, and a member of the Rockbridge Bird Club. She is also a letterpress printer and active member of the Book Arts Program at the Virginia Center for the Book in Charlottesville.

Alice Tianbo Zhang is an Assistant Professor of Economics and an affiliate of the Faculty of Environmental Studies at W&L. She moved to Lexington in 2020 with her husband, Wesley. She serves on the advisory board of W&L's Mudd Center for Ethics and is a member of the university's Sustainability Committee. Alice has previously worked on climate change mitigation and advocacy at the local level and looks forward to promoting sustainability and conservation in Rockbridge County and beyond.

Note: Bill King was also elected to the board as Treasurer but subsequently resigned for personal reasons. RACC supporters interested in the position should contact the president, bob.biersack@rockbridgeconservation.org.



New members of RACC's board include (from left) Bonnie Bernstein, Sam Allen, and Alice Tianbo Zhang.

PFAS concerns *continued from Page 1*

research is PFAS in biosolids. Last October, she participated in the presentation on this subject to the Rockbridge Farm bureau and offered to use her lab, funding resources, and expertise to perform testing for PFAS of the biosolids, the leachate, the soil of the fields where biosolids have been applied, and/or nearby water. Thus far, no Rockbridge public entity nor any farmers currently accepting biosolids have signed up testing done for PFAS.

To learn more about PFAS problems, join this effort, or volunteer for free PFAS testing, email Barbara Walsh at director@rockbridgeconservation.org.

Save the Date

Annual Community Cleanup **March 18-26, 2023**

This annual event, sponsored by RACC in collaboration with Rockbridge County and VDOT, needs volunteers to make Rockbridge more beautiful.

Look for sign-up information at
www.rockbridgeconservation.org.

Know of a road that is especially trash-heaped? Let us know by email at cleanup@rockbridgeconservation.org.

RACC adopts Strategic Plan

Under the leadership of Gregg Amonette, assisted by Communications Director Shannon Spencer, Rockbridge Conservation recently ratified its new Strategic Plan at the end of 2022.

The public can view the document by contacting the RACC office, director@rockbridgeconservation.org.

Update on Communications

RACC's Eco-Calendar lists our own and other local events related to conservation. We provide this service to our members and friends free of charge on the first and third Thursday of each month.

The mostly-monthly Connection eNews provides readers with details about committee activities.

If you are interested in receiving these email publications, please visit our website's homepage and scroll to the bottom for a signup link. Or contact Shannon Spencer at communications@rockbridgeconservation.org.

RACC seminars set for winter and spring of 2023

Rockbridge Conservation will continue its series of monthly seminars through June before taking a summer hiatus. Seminars will take place by Zoom at 7 p.m. on the third Wednesday of the month. Zoom links can be obtained at rockbridgeconservation.org. Each seminar will be recorded and placed on the website for later viewing.

- **January 18:** Jared Lee, Associate Professor of Biology at Southern Virginia University, talked about the impacts of invasive species in our local ecology, with kudzu as Exhibit A. The seminar can be viewed on the above website.
- **February 15:** Sarah Coffey will describe her work with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to help grant-recipients with wetland property to hire contractors to restore riparian buffers.
- **March 21:** To be announced.
- **April 19:** John Driscoll of the Lexington Planning Commission discusses Lexington's emerging Green Infrastructure Plan.
- **May 17:** Two speakers will address different approaches to carbon pricing. Annette Green will discuss Boxerwood's Coreworks Program, which sells carbon credits to finance projects that reduce or sequester carbon emissions. Clarence Edwards of the Friends Committee on National Legislation discusses the potential benefits of creating a federal carbon tax.
- **June 21:** Peter Delvecchio, a local snake enthusiast, will describe the contributions of snakes to local ecology and consider how to live with and protect them. He will bring some live snakes to show us. *Note: This will be an in-person event at the Jordan's Point Pavilion in Lexington.*

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