



# RIDGE AND RIVER NEWS

## *The Newsletter of Rockbridge Conservation*

August 2024

### **RC Now Hiring!**

As our wonderful Executive Director, Barbara Walsh, plans for retirement, Rockbridge Conservation is seeking a new person to fill that role.

The work is part-time, and we're looking for someone in the community with a passion for environmental and conservation issues to help the Board lead RC's continued growth and developing impact in the face of climate change.

We hope the new ED will begin work in the fall to allow a couple of months' overlap with Barbara before she leaves at the end of the year.

If you or someone you know is interested, the full job description is posted at [rockbridgeconservation.org](http://rockbridgeconservation.org). You can also reach out to [RC President Bob Biersack](#) or another Board member to learn details.

### **MRA talks with Scouts about lake**

The Maury River Alliance (MRA) followed up on its highly successful Public Forum in April by expanding media outreach, increasing communication with the environmental law community, conducting one-on-one dialogs with key legislative staff, and exploring ways to facilitate unified support among local governments.

Solid progress has been made in a series of exchanges with the Boy Scouts Council, including a lengthy session on July 16 at the Goshen Scout Reservation to agree on a plan of collaborative action starting in early fall to develop a comprehensive plan for managing Lake Merriweather.

MRA members will be available to discuss the issues with visitors to the Rockbridge Conservation booth at the Community Festival on Saturday, August 24.

### **PFAS in our drinking water below new EPA limits? *Not good enough!***

To meet new requirements from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the suppliers of drinking water to Rockbridge County and local municipalities recently started testing to determine whether Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) in local tap water exceed the new standards.

The tests showed that local water contains PFAS at levels below the Maximum Contamination Levels (MCLs) established by the EPA. Unfortunately, according to toxicologist Joe DiNardo, the MCL thresholds were not set for protection of human health or the environment, but were instead part of a "cost benefit analysis" favored by the chemical industry. In fact, PFAS are so toxic that the only safe level in drinking water is zero; indeed, the EPA has set zero as an aspirational goal for some future date.

Meanwhile, testing at Mountain View Elementary School and some private wells in Rockbridge County also revealed the presence of PFAS. These chemicals are indeed ubiquitous in our environment.

The two PFAS chemicals of most concern are PFOA and PFOS: The EPA has assigned each an MCL of 4 ppt (parts per trillion). However, several human studies have shown that PFOA causes kidney cancers at 0.007 ppt, a tiny fraction of the EPA's limit. Similarly, PFOS causes cancer in test animals at 1 ppt, just a quarter of the new EPA threshold.

An additional problem is that very few laboratories across the nation are equipped to measure PFAS at the very low levels that are of toxicological concern.

### **Community Festival set for Saturday, August 24**

Visit the RC booth at the [Rockbridge Community Festival](#) to learn what our committees are doing as well as how to join our conservation team. See also the special insert in this newsletter.

## Maury River News: Ben Salem water quality

Summer is a great time to cool off in the Maury River with friends and family. But the river is subject to pollution from upstream, causing many people to ask whether it is safe for swimming. The James River Alliance has developed a tool for citizens to ascertain conditions in the James and its major tributaries such as the Maury, and RC is working to make the information more useful locally.

The James River Watch (JRW) website includes a monitoring site at the Ben Salem Wayside that reports temperature, turbidity, and bacteria levels. To see the readings, go to the JRW website (links to right and below) and click on Check Your River Conditions. A map will appear; enlarge it until you can click on Ben Salem Wayside and you will be rewarded with the weekly data at Ben Salem, which has sometimes reported e-coli exceeding safe levels. Note: levels may change between weekly samplings, especially if it rains.

Sampling takes place Thursday morning with results posted Friday afternoon through the summer. Check this resource by [web address](#) or QR Code before you head out to swim, fish or boat on the Maury.



## Balloon fest goes green with RC's help

At the invitation of the organizers, eight dedicated RC volunteers helped maximize recycling and capture food waste at Balloons Over Rockbridge, July 6-7. Despite extreme heat, the event at the Virginia Horse Center (across from the main complex) attracted a crowd estimated at 10,000.

The RC effort kept the following out of the landfill:

- Nine bags of plastic bottles and aluminum cans (bottles recycled by the county, cans to Ruritans for charities)
- A large bag of plastic jugs (recycled by the county)
- A bag of plastic film (recycled for Trex benches at Natural Bridge State Park)
- Three 5-gal buckets of compost (sent to an organic farm)
- Stacks of flattened boxes (recycled by the county)



Volunteer Tom Morrison monitors a trash station. Each set-up had RC's bags for recycling cans and bottles, buckets for food scraps, and a trash can for the rest.

**To borrow recycling containers  
for your event, email**

[info@rockbridgeconservation.org](mailto:info@rockbridgeconservation.org).

### Hot Links in newsletter

*If you are reading this on paper,* use this QR Code to access the electronic newsletter on the RC website.



### Septic & Well Assistance update

RC is managing the local Septic and Well Assistance Program (SWAP), funded by the Virginia Department of Health. Several local families have qualified for assistance to install or improve their septic systems, and two families are receiving help with their wells. The application period closed on July 31.

*Ridge & River News* is published quarterly and edited by Sally Nunneley and Shannon Spencer.

>> Printed on 100% recycled paper when available <<

## Woods Creek goes native (*work in progress*)!

Work to remove invasive plants and install natives continues along the banks of Woods Creek and its adjacent trail. The effort is led by RC's Friends of Woods Creek (FoWC) with invaluable assistance from the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners and Lexington Public Works. The Rockbridge Bird Club monitors the nesting boxes along the trail where bluebirds and wrens have fledged.

FoWC has received two grants to help buy native plants for installation in the riparian zone; however, the lack of rain has forced delay of planting until the fall.

The Friends are planning interpretative signage along the trail and hope to partner with a historical organization to broaden the context.

For more information on the project or to help with the work, email [info@rockbridgeconservation.org](mailto:info@rockbridgeconservation.org).



RC board member Dave Agnor works with the volunteer crew to clear invasive plants from the Woods Creek Trail.

### *Letter from RC's President*

## Getting a grip on large solar-power facilities

For the past several months, I have represented Rockbridge Conservation as a member a small group created by the County Board of Supervisors to draft an ordinance to guide the future construction of commercial-scale solar power generation in Rockbridge County.

National and state policies have encouraged the development of clean, renewable energy resources as interest in commercial solar development has grown state-wide in recent years. Such facilities are currently permitted under existing zoning as "special exceptions," with each proposal reviewed individually by the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors. This ad hoc process is difficult to conduct fairly and makes the county vulnerable to proposals that don't necessarily recognize and protect the unique landscape and cultural characteristics of our area.

A group of six county residents, including one member of the Planning Commission and one County Supervisor, have met regularly for several months to review best practices from other jurisdictions as well as a wide range of research on issues of soil- and water-protection, defining appropriate landscapes (e.g., minimizing grading and prohibiting clear-cutting) and requiring public meetings where citizens can address developers about their questions and concerns. Other elements of a new ordinance would include legal and financial protections to ensure that facilities are managed properly and dismantled at the end of their useful life at no cost to the county or its citizens.

Coming from different perspectives, the group developed a pretty strong consensus. We expect to spend time soon with both the Planning Commission and the Supervisors to start the formal process of approving an ordinance that allows for development of clean energy while preserving the beauty, ecological richness, and unique character of this community.

— **Bob Biersack**

### **(Not) Mowing for the birds**

A reminder: If you have large fields to mow, waiting until September and the end of the avian breeding season is a kindness to our grassland birds, who are always under pressure and whose populations are dwindling due to human activity. For more information, click on [Field Management Guidelines for Virginia's Grassland and Shrubland Birds](#).

### **Sunday Nov 10: Save the Date!**

Members, friends, and the public are invited to Rockbridge Conservation's

### **48th Annual Meeting**

on Sunday, November 10, 1-5 p.m. The afternoon will feature activities, speakers, good food, and more!

# The Gift of Conservation

This introduces a new series of short articles that will contain information about how you can support Rockbridge Conservation (RC) in its increasingly important work to reduce the local impact of climate change and all the conservation challenges facing our area. For further information, use this QR code or check Rockbridge Conservation's website, [www.rockbridgeconservation.org/donate/](http://www.rockbridgeconservation.org/donate/).



## WHAT YOU CAN GIVE:

### Cash

The most common way of giving to RC is by a mailed check or a credit card donation via our website.

### Donor Advised Fund

These funds may allow you to set aside tax-advantaged sums now, while distributing them later.

### Stocks and Bonds

Giving an appreciated stock or bond is a tax-advantaged way to make charitable gifts. With careful planning, you may be able to reduce or eliminate your capital gains tax while supporting RC.

### Retirement Assets

A gift of retirement assets, such as an employee retirement plan, IRA, tax-sheltered annuity, or Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) may fund RC's future while shielding your heirs from certain taxes.

### Life Insurance

A life insurance policy may be used as a charitable gift while saving other assets earmarked for family members.

### Real Estate

A gift of real estate may preserve cash assets, provide tax and income advantages, and significantly aid RC.

*Rockbridge Conservation is a 501(c)3 organization with EIN number 51-0228197. RC does not provide legal or financial advice. Please speak with your legal or financial advisors to learn more about the options that will work best for you.*

Telephone: 540-463-2330 \* Website: [RockbridgeConservation.org](http://RockbridgeConservation.org) \* Facebook: Rockbridge-Conservation

Executive Director: Barbara Walsh

Chris Wise

Charles Winder

Craig Vincombe

Melody Tennant

Gretchen Sukow

Jane Stewart

Lee Merrill

Jim Manley

Brian Jenkins

Chris Connors

Bonnie Bernstein

Sam Allen

David Agnor

Astrika Adams

Secretary, Sally Nunneley

Treasurer, Megan Hess

Vice President, Shannon Spencer

President, Bob Biersack

Board Members:

Lexington, VA 24450

P.O. Box 564

Rockbridge Conservation



LEXINGTON, VA 24450

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