



RIDGE AND RIVER NEWS

The Newsletter of Rockbridge Conservation

Winter 2025

PFAS Chemicals Fuel Growing Concern, Here and Nationwide

Anyone who follows the news will know that PFAS “forever chemicals” are the subject of a growing uproar as we become aware of their toxicity—long known but hidden from public view—as well as their ubiquity in products from home furnishings to firefighting foam.

Last year, the EPA set a nominal threshold for PFAS in public drinking-water systems, based more on the limits of testing technology than on health concerns; in fact, the only safe level for PFAS in drinking water is zero.

As the situation becomes clearer, numbers of large corporations are moving to escape possible liability for the environmental damage. For instance, Synagro, a giant fertilizer company whose website claims it “converts biosolids into environmentally friendly by-products, e.g. crop fertilizers,” recently asked the federal government to be held harmless for any adverse effects from PFAS in its products.

Of local interest:

- The Virginia Department of Environmental quality is allowing thousands of acres to be fertilized by Synagro, now that Maryland has banned application of biosolids.
- Mohawk is suing 3M and DuPont for alleged failure to disclose that PFAS chemicals were toxic, even though that problem has been well known in technical circles for decades. Their argument is that they are “passive receivers” of PFAS-containing materials, not responsible for damage done by the compounds. This raises questions about massive contamination of the recent Rockbridge landfill expansion, for which Mohawk donated tons of shredded carpet and padding to form the required liner of the new bays.
- Banks are beginning to worry about the long-term value of farmland that has been treated with sewage sludge and are growing hesitant about financing

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Annual Community Cleanup Set for March 22-30

Rockbridge Conservation organizes the annual cleanup, a 30-year tradition accomplished with the cooperation of Rockbridge County and the Virginia Department of Transportation. It is also supported by Boxerwood and Walkabout Outfitter.

The 2025 event is chaired by RC board members Melody Tennant and David Agnor. Tennant says, “Enjoy the great outdoors, get some exercise, organize a friendly group, and together restore a Rockbridge road to it’s natural beauty. It’s a winning combination!”

The cleanup began in 1995, organized by volunteers from Rockbridge Conservation (then RACC), including Mollie Messimer, Kevin Donovan, Steve Richards, and Chris Wise. Its focus back then was on clearing the many massive, illegal dumping grounds spread throughout the county on hillsides, in sinkholes and along ravines.

About a dozen years ago, RC board member David Harbor became the coordinator; thanks to his work, the cleanup continues to flourish, featuring 300-400+ people who recover a total of 10-15 tons of trash along roads and streams, wearing orange vests and using large trash bags supplied by VDOT and later hauled off by the county.

To sign up, see details in the box, top of Page 3.



Last year, the Waste Eliminators, a neighborhood group, cleaned up an area in north Rockbridge and celebrated afterwards with a chili dinner and good times.

Letter from the Executive Director: Thoughts from Early Days

I'd like all friends of Rockbridge Conservation to know that my first months at RC have been truly tremendous!

I must begin with crediting my amazing predecessor, Barbara Walsh. I could never hope to match the depth and breadth of her expertise on conservation issues and beyond. Even today, Barbara continues to lend her technical and contextual knowledge to many of RC's initiatives. Thank you, Barbara, for your ongoing guidance and generosity.

I have been amazed every day by the vast expertise of RC's volunteers; evidently my days as a student are not yet over, and I look forward to learning much more about the intersection of conservation science and community impact.

In addition to their expertise, RC volunteers exhibit a passion for the work that ensures progress. We must nurture this combination of passion and progress as it will continue to inspire generations to come.

Working with this team is a daily reminder that Rockbridge is a special place that not only attracts special people—it captivates them and motivates us all to protect a "specialness" that is hard to articulate.

Going forward, my approach is to empower the team in the following ways:

Ensure individual perspectives are heard. Scholars and students. Introverts and extroverts. Idealists and cynics. There's a place for anyone with an open mind.

Identify efficiencies that bolster effectiveness. Some friction is inevitable and even useful. However, to be efficient and effective, we must minimize pain points to best leverage our efforts toward our mission.

Foster a sense of teamwork. We share the desire for community and our hopes to conserve and protect Rockbridge's beauty and resources. As a team, we will be better able engage positively with ongoing challenges.

— *Jamie Goodin*

When It Comes to Mowing Fields, Timing is Everything

Virginia Working Landscapes is a nonprofit collaboration. They write, "North America has lost nearly 3 billion birds since the 1970s. Grassland birds have suffered the steepest declines, losing over half of their population. Adopting bird-friendly land management practices can be an effective strategy for bringing Virginia's suite of grassland birds and other native bird communities back.

Mowing should occur when it has minimal effect on birds and the insects on which they feed." Here is their advice on mowing open fields:

Best time is now, Feb 15 to Mar 31.

Bad time is May 1 to Sep 15, the extended breeding season.

Worst time is summer, Jun 1 to Jul 15, when nesting and hatching take place.

For more information, click [here](https://vaworkinglandscapes.org/education/resources/field-management-guidelines-for-grassland-birds/) or go to vaworkinglandscapes.org/education/resources/field-management-guidelines-for-grassland-birds/.

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purchases of such land. Notably, some farms in Maine have been closed down permanently due to PFAS contamination of their soil.

- Farm families and rural communities where land has been treated with sludge or sludge-based fertilizer have likely been consuming produce and drinking well water with detectable levels of PFAS.
- Due to runoff from farmland, eating fish caught in local waters is risky, especially for children.

This is clearly an evolving story, and one we should follow with care. Perhaps substitutes for PFAS will be developed and reduce further environmental contamination, but the PFAS already out there will not degrade or disappear in the foreseeable future: That's why they are called "forever chemicals."

Mary Anne Gilmore

Rockbridge Conservation gratefully acknowledges the donations received in memory of Mary Anne Gilmore, an enthusiastic supporter of our work on watershed issues.

Land Use Committee Needs People Who Look to the Future

A group of Rockbridge Conservation's board members met in late January to reinvigorate RC's Land Use Committee.

The committee will focus on the Arcadia Wildlife Corridor, conservation easements, land use planning in the county, and more. If you are interested in getting involved, message info@rockbridgeconservation.org, and put "Land Use" in the subject line.

How to Join the Cleanup

This year's community cleanup runs from Saturday, March 22 to Sunday, March 30. Here's how to sign up:

- 1) Pick a road or area that you'd like to clean up.
- 2) Go to rockbridgeconservation.org/cleanup
- 3) Fill in the simple form to claim your area.

Rockbridge Conservation

thanks our 2024 donors!!

*You helped make our work
more effective and allowed us
to reach a wider audience!*

To donate in 2025,
please visit our website
www.rockbridgeconservation.org
or scan this QR code with your
smartphone:



Planning Ahead and Showing Your Love for Rockbridge Conservation

Bequests in Wills or Living Trusts

A charitable gift from your estate can enable you to achieve your own financial goals while also benefiting Rockbridge Conservation. Making RC a beneficiary in your estate plan is simple to implement but also easy to alter, should you need to do so during your lifetime. A bequest may be right for you if you:

- Want to make a legacy gift that will support Rockbridge Conservation into the future.
- Wish to retain the flexibility to rewrite your plan if you change your mind.
- Need access to your assets should your circumstances change.

Rockbridge Conservation is a 501(c)3 organization; 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.

What's the Latest?

There are many ways to keep up with Rockbridge Conservation's multifarious activities:

- The bimonthly *Eco-Calendar* (email)
- The quarterly *Ridge & River News* (email/print)
- Social media: *Facebook* and *Instagram*
- RC's website: www.rockbridgeconservation.org

Ridge & River News is published quarterly and edited by Sally Nunneley and Shannon Spencer.
>> Printed on 100% recycled paper when available <<

In Memoriam: Sandra Stuart

Rockbridge Conservation acknowledges with great sadness the loss of Sandra Stuart, an extraordinary volunteer who for decades worked tirelessly on important conservation issues. She approached her projects with enthusiasm, tenacity, and an unmatched level of expertise together with willingness to learn..

Sandra was unwavering in her efforts to evaluate, protect and advocate for Rockbridge waterways.

Thank you, Sandra, we'll miss you.

Outreach: RC's recent activities in the Rockbridge community

- Argued for relevant conservation bills on the legislature's 2025 Lobby Day in Richmond.
- Joined with local partners to continue developing a Rockbridge ordinance for large solar arrays.
- Supported RC's Maury River Alliance working with National Capital Scouts on management of their lake and dam.
- Pursued further testing for PFAS in local waters.
- Partnered with local Habitat for Humanity to support solar arrays on new Habitat houses.
- Advanced local implementation of the state's sewer and water assistance program.
- Worked on maintenance of public-access trails at the Sunnyside Preserve and the Uncas Trail.
- Promoted its Community Food Recovery composting program.
- Continued efforts to remove invasive species and plant natives along Woods Creek.
- Studied feasibility of a pickup site in Lexington for products from the Refill Store in Staunton.
- Planned improvements to the Rockbridge Conservation website.
- Initiated discussions of ecological greening of the Lexington Golf Course under W&L management.

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