

Maryland Grazers Network

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) is please to announce that they have received a grant to set up a Grazing Mentor program to help farmers who want to transition from conventional feeding (growing corn as feed) to grazing. CBF has developed a "dream team" of farming "Mentors" and are looking for "Partner" farmers who would like to participate. The program can handle approximately 15 farmers the first year but coordinators hope to double the number next year. There are currently 10 Mentors throughout Maryland.

Dairy and beef cattle are the primary target farms for the first year but there is a sheep and goat expert on the "dream team" as well.

Opportunity for Grazers – A new project, the Maryland Grazers Network, is paying experienced cattle or dairy grazers to work as mentors with farmers wanting to improve their grazing systems or begin a grazing system (farmer partners). Also there is an opportunity for farmers wanting to improve their marketing or to start a direct marketing operation to work with a farmer mentor who is doing creative marketing to take advantage of the growing market interest in grass based beef. Mentors have strong support from research and field experts in pasture management, marketing, and fencing and watering systems, and can bring this expertise in to help farmer partners where needed.

Project Focus – This project has a strong focus on both farm economics and water quality. The project's funders, the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network, are interested in supporting initiatives that help improve the water quality in the Chesapeake Bay. They recognize that to achieve long term water quality benefits in agriculture, farmers need to focus on practices and systems that improve farm profitability as well as water quality. Providing support for farmers to develop healthy grazing systems meets both of these goals.

Focusing energy on growing high quality pastures and hay can help many farmers improve their bottom line. With costs of farm inputs rising rapidly, 'grass farming' (as pasture and hay systems are often called) can provide a healthier (for ruminants – beef, dairy, sheep and goats) and more cost-effective source of feed. Well-managed pasture and hay systems provide permanent vegetative cover protecting the land from soil erosion. Pasture fertility can be largely supplied by legumes grown in the pastures and by the animals themselves naturally recycling nutrients. With healthy grass, this greatly reduces the likelihood of nutrient runoff.

Project Elements

1. **Pilot project** – This is an effort to develop a new and strong mentoring program for grazers that includes marketing of grass based beef as a significant element. All farmers participating this first year will be helping shape this new mentoring program to make it work best for farmer mentors and for farmers wanting to adopt a new grazing or marketing system.
2. **Improving the bottom line \$\$** - A major element is to carefully track costs and sales to ensure that new or improved practices/systems/marketing benefit the farm financially.
3. **Grazing and water quality** – Improving pastures should not only improve the bottom line \$, but also help improve water quality in nearby streams. Participating farmers are encouraged to consider stream-fencing and installing watering systems that keep farm animals out of streams.
4. **Marketing** – Once a strong grazing system is in place the project will provide expertise to help farmers market grass fed products to enhance farm profitability.

Project Funding

Funding for the project is being provided by the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network (CBFN) which includes several funders in the Bay region who are pooling a portion of their resources to collaboratively support projects that improve the health of the Chesapeake Bay. These funders include the Agua Fund (VA only), the Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment, The Chesapeake Bay Trust (MD only), The Edith and Curtis Munson Foundation, Prince Charitable Trust (VA only), Town Creek Foundation, Wallace Genetic Foundation, Western Pennsylvania Watershed Protection Program (PA only), Marpat Foundation (Potomac watershed only), Virginia Environmental Endowment (VA only). Also W. K. Kellogg Foundation is providing support for projects with market-based incentives that address managing animal waste.

Contacts - If you are interested in participating in the Maryland Grazers Network contact either one of the people below:

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