

SUPPORT HB 687/SB597: Agriculture - Cost-Sharing Program - Fixed Natural Filter Practices

In 2016 we moved our farming business from a rented farm in Myersville Maryland to our own, purchased farm in nearby Middletown. The farm we acquired consists of 192 acres, about 140 of which are tillable, and had been conventionally cropped in corn and soy for many years. We could tell that past farmers had been fighting erosion, as our pond--originally 10 feet deep--was now a foot deep to mud.

Because our farm is in the Catoctin Watershed, a priority conservation area, we were fortunate: USDA EQIP money was available to help us install fences and waterlines and establish the perennial pastures that are a cornerstone of our diverse, grass-based farming system. Additionally, we worked with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to plant more than 1000 trees in riparian buffer zones of our farm.

With pastures seeded, fences installed, and waterline snaking out to our furthest fields, we have been able to grow our farming business: raising meat chickens, laying hens, pigs, steers, and turkeys as well as organic vegetables. We have also been able to rent pasture land to our grazing mentor, a successful, fifth generation organic dairy farmer who needed more pasture so that he could grow his farm to a scale that would better support both him and his adult son.

The grasses, trees, and grazing systems that we employ are performing a number of ecosystem services:

- We have vastly reduced the erosion of our valuable prime farmland topsoil
- By taking land out of conventional row crops and putting it into organically managed, rotationally grazed pasture, we have eliminated fertilizer inputs and are doing our part to restore the Chesapeake Bay.
- The roots of our grasses and trees are sequestering atmospheric carbon in the form of underground organic matter. In four years on our farm we have already documented improvements in organic matter, aggregate stability, and increased soil respiration.

Pasture establishment, tree planting, fences, and waterlines all cost money, and we would have been hard-pressed to achieve the kind of rapid implementation that we did had the burden rested entirely on our shoulders. With our systems now in place, however, we don't need annual cost-shares--just more hands!

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