

# CO-OP CONNECTIONS



Virginia  
Cooperative Council

Newsletter of the Virginia Cooperative Council - "Achieving together what one cannot do alone"

Fall 2023

## Wenger & French recognized with Council awards

Norman Wenger, Rockingham Cooperative's longtime CEO, and Thomas French, a young dairy farmer from Woodstock, Va., each were presented with an award Oct. 5 at the Virginia Cooperative Council's Co-op Month breakfast, held at The Olde Dominion Agricultural Complex in Chatham, Va.

Wenger recently retired after 49 years spent helping his cooperative grow to become one of the Shenandoah Valley's most successful businesses. He earned the Career Cooperative Leadership Award for both his contributions to Rockingham Cooperative and the development of its Farm Ministry, a nonprofit that he helped create.

"Under Norman's guidance, our co-op has been a top supporter of youth livestock shows across the counties we serve," said Adam Ford, Rockingham Cooperative's marketing manager. Ford explained, "The Farm Ministry supports our farmer members by using donated funds to purchase products they produce, then, in turn, donating them to the less fortunate in the communities we serve."

Thomas French, the Young Cooperator Award recipient, serves as herd manager for the French Brothers Dairy in Maurertown. This Shenandoah County native provides outstanding service to his community, offering guided tours of his family's dairy to a wide range of community organizations, schools, and interested groups. His tours not only offer an up-close look at farming and dairy production on the 1,600-acre farm, but he also details how using robotic milkers has revolutionized the milking process by reducing labor costs while enhancing efficiency and animal welfare.

Thomas was nominated by the Maryland & Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative. In addition to MDVA, he and his family belong to Culpeper Farmers' Cooperative, Premier Select Sires,



**From left: Rockingham Cooperative's Adam Ford and Sam Liggett, Young Cooperator Award recipient Thomas French, Career Cooperative Leadership Award winner Norman Wenger and Matt Dietz of Rockingham Cooperative.**

Rappahannock Electric Cooperative, Rockingham Cooperative, Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative and Rockingham Petroleum Cooperative.

An active member of the Virginia Farm Bureau's Young Farmer Committee, French works with fellow young farmers to promote collaboration and best practices.

In her letter of support, Shenandoah Valley Chamber of Commerce President Sharon Baroncelli said, "Thomas' passion for sustainability, agricultural education, and community engagement make him a wonderful candidate for this award!"

### Mark your calendars!

- ◆ Feb. 15: Virginia Institute on Cooperative Education applications due
- ◆ Feb. 23: Scroggs-Raper Scholarship applications due
- ◆ March 7: Annual Meeting at the Louisa Generation Facility in Gordonsville, followed by a tour of this ODEC facility
- ◆ March 22-24: Virginia Institute on Cooperative Education at Graves Mountain Lodge

# Inaugural Co-op Expo attracts 300 students

The Virginia Cooperative Council tried something new this year to celebrate Co-op Month! Co-op Month Committee Chairman Dustin Francis of Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative suggested holding an event at the Olde Dominion Agricultural Complex (ODAC) in Chatham, Va., to help students in grades 6-12 learn more about Virginia's cooperatives.

"The ODAC complex provided a perfect setting for co-op exhibitors to share information and giveaway items," said Mary Howell, the Council's Executive Secretary who started promoting this event to Agricultural Educators last spring.

More than a dozen groups from seven counties, totaling 300 students, arrived between 10 a.m. and noon. After visiting the exhibits and submitting answers to a short quiz about the participating co-ops, students had a chance to win door prizes. They also enjoyed a hot lunch and took part in a leadership exercise conducted by three of the FFA State Officers.

"Many thanks to Augusta Cooperative, Colonial Farm Credit, Farm Credit of the Virginias, Mecklenburg Electric



**Josh Carty shares information about Rockingham Cooperative, then lets students "spin the wheel" for a chance to test their knowledge and win a variety of prizes.**

Cooperative, Old Dominion Electric Cooperative, Piedmont Farmers Cooperative, Rockingham Cooperative, Southside Virginia Community College/Power Line Worker Program, Southside Electric Cooperative, the VMD Association of Electric Cooperatives, and the Virginia Tech Dept. of Agricultural and Applied Economics for supporting this event," said Howell.

The Council would like to hold a similar event next year for high school students in another part of the commonwealth. If you'd like to help host and/or have a suggested location, please email [mary.howell@sscoop.com](mailto:mary.howell@sscoop.com) by Jan 15.

***Congratulations to Lovettsville Cooperative Market! After months of fundraising and planning, they launched their new storefront in November. A grand opening celebration is set for Dec. 2; visit their Facebook page or go to [lovettsville-grocery.com](http://lovettsville-grocery.com) for more information.***



## Members asked to support VICE scholarships when renewing

For decades, the Virginia Institute on Cooperative Education (VICE), a three-day leadership conference, has been offered free of charge to participating high school students, even if not specifically sponsored by a member cooperative.

"While we've hosted less than 30 students the past two years, we hope to reach 50 attendees for next year's VICE," explained VCC President Adam Shiflett of Farm Credit of the Virginias. He added that the volunteer staff cover their own expenses and that Graves Mountain Lodge has so far kept food and lodging at pre-pandemic rates for our group. "Many members already support this great event by providing one or more \$350 scholarships with their dues each year, and for 2024 renewal we ask every member to cover the \$350 cost for one student."



# Scroggs-Raper scholarship winners: where are they now?

This column profiles past attendees of the Virginia Institute for Cooperative Education (VICE), and Scroggs-Raper Scholarship recipients. Please contact VCC at [mary.howell@sscoop.com](mailto:mary.howell@sscoop.com) if you'd like to suggest someone to feature in an upcoming issue!

## Normand Adams

### Undergraduate Academic & Student Support Advisor, Virginia Tech Dept. of Agricultural & Applied Economics

Please share your educational background.

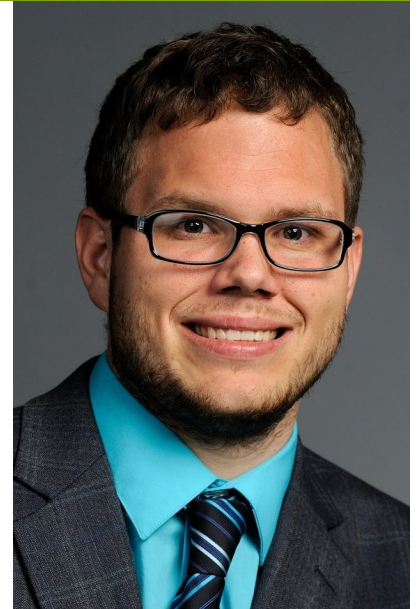
I graduated from Virginia Tech in 2015 with a double major in environmental horticulture and agribusiness management, and earned my Master of Science in Agriculture and Applied Economics from Tech in 2020.

#### Tell us about your career and how your college experience helped prepare you.

Before my current position as undergraduate academic and student support advisor and adjunct instructor for the Agricultural and Applied Economics Department (AAEC) at Virginia Tech, I spent seven years as the graduate program coordinator for the AAEC Department. My college experience helped me to obtain the necessary subject knowledge to help students navigate their paths toward their own degree completion. Additionally, I was able to build an extensive network by being an active student and believe these connections played a major role in my success in the department.

#### What advice do you have for other agriculture students?

Don't be afraid to ask questions and get involved with clubs and other extracurricular activities as soon as possible. These experiences will help you tremendously throughout college and beyond!



Normand Adams, 2013 Scroggs-Raper Scholarship Recipient.

## Executive Secretary's message: Remembering Allen Melton

In mid-September, I was deeply saddened to learn of the passing of Allen Melton, my predecessor as executive secretary for the Virginia Cooperative Council. Allen had been an active VICE volunteer for nearly 50 years. After he retired from Southern States Cooperative in 2015, he managed the Council until the end of 2018, when he left to care for his beloved wife, Pamala, who passed the following year.

I first met Allen in 2013, when I began attending meetings of the Virginia Cooperative Council. Early in 2019, Allen carefully showed me all that I'd need to know to take over running the Council and was only a phone call away many times when a question arose. When I learned that a long-time riding friend of mine, Claude Brewer, was Allen's cousin, I realized both share a great love of the outdoors. Anyone who met either would be impressed by the deep faith both evidenced throughout their lives.

Just weeks before Allen passed away unexpectedly at his home (having failed to show up to drive a church friend travel to an appointment), I'd not only received his membership renewal, but he also included a \$350 donation to cover the cost of a high school student attending VICE.

Allen, I'm so glad the Council recognized you with the Career Cooperative Leadership Award in 2019. You left us too soon and will long be remembered with gratitude for your selflessness and inspiring example!

- Mary Howell



Allen Melton (standing, far left) as a member of the 1994 VCC board of directors; his service to the Council dates to the 1970s.

# Electric co-ops introduce young women to the industry

On Nov. 3, more than 80 high school girls from across the Commonwealth participated in the third annual Co-op Girl Power Camp sponsored by the Virginia, Maryland & Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives (VMDAEC) at their state-of-the-art training center in Palmyra, Va.

This interactive experience helped participants learn about a variety of career paths in the energy industry, including working on a line crew, in a substation, as a drone operator, with advanced metering technology, or as a fiber broadband technician. In eight half-hour sessions, participants had a chance to climb electric utility poles, operate a bucket truck, pilot a drone, use a hotline stick and tie wire while wearing rubber gloves. They also learned about safety on the job, fiber splicing, interviewing and looking for a job, and managing personal finances.

“More than 30 people from 10 cooperatives teamed up to make this event happen,” said Jim Robertson, VMDAEC member services manager and Council board member. “Connecting more women with the energy industry has been an industry-wide goal for years,” he added, noting that many line workers are needed in coming years to fill positions coming vacant due to retirements.

Several partners helped make this event possible at no cost to attendees, who also learned about Southside Virginia Community College’s Power Line Worker Training Program. To learn more, visit [www.vmdaec.com/powerfulcareers](http://www.vmdaec.com/powerfulcareers).



***Dehlilaray Roop, a senior at Warren County High School, climbs a utility pole Nov. 3 at the VMD Electric Cooperatives training center. Roop plans to follow in her father’s footsteps as a line worker.***

## Virginia Cooperative Council

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