

CO-OP CONNECTIONS



Virginia
Cooperative Council

Quarterly newsletter of the Virginia Cooperative Council

Spring 2024



Six FFA State Officers and 45 high school students took part in this year's Virginia Institute on Cooperative Education, held March 22-24 at Graves Mountain Lodge. Photo by Jim Robertson, VMD Association of Electric Cooperatives. To see more photos from this year's event, visit <https://vmdaec.smugmug.com/VICE-2024>

Students excel at VICE conference

This year's Virginia Institute of Cooperative Education (VICE) included the largest and most geographically diverse group of students in several years, each of whom profiled a local cooperative as part of the application process.

"Our 45 participants came from across Virginia, with BARC and Community electric cooperatives sponsoring students for the first time," said Mary Howell, executive secretary. In addition to experienced adult leaders, five past VICE participants helped out as student leaders for the store simulation teams.

"I'm especially grateful to Cathy Statz, a co-op educator from Wisconsin, who not only shared her worldwide experience of cooperatives with attendees, but also pinch-hit for one of our breakout-session presenters," Howell added.

Carroll County ag educator Sarah Jo Jones led the "True Colors" exercise to help students better understand their personalities and those of others, with fellow educators Jacob Lewis from Augusta County and David Maitland from Culpeper County lending their expertise. After the "Welcome to Cooperatives" test, students worked in teams for the "Who's Minding the Store?" simulation.

Making financial decisions over five quarters, each team learned to interpret the results as they sought to increase their store's net worth. After a long day inside, rainy skies cleared in time for the teens to enjoy a guided hay ride to learn about the area's history or challenging hike up Graves Mountain.

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VICE winners

Zoey Berezansky, sponsored by Colonial Farm Credit (\$2,000)

Emory Seal, sponsored by Rockingham Cooperative (\$1,500)

Audrey Garrison, sponsored by Rockingham Cooperative (\$1,000)

Cameron Crews, sponsored by Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative (\$500 Allen Melton Scholarship)

Louisa Generation Facility hosts 62nd Annual Meeting

Continuing our new tradition of hosting the Annual Meeting at member facilities, the Council's Annual Meeting was held March 7 at the Old Dominion Electric Cooperative (ODEC) Louisa Generation Facility outside Gordonsville. Built in 2003, this natural-gas peaking plant helps meet electricity needs during heat waves or cold snaps to help meet increased demand.

During the business meeting, members reelected Brad Brown of Augusta Cooperative, Dustin Francis of Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative, Rachel Shupe of Colonial Farm Credit and Brian Wolfe of Rappahannock Electric Cooperative to three-year terms. Keynote speaker Erin Puryear, manager of member services & energy innovation planning for ODEC, detailed how they educate members on energy efficiency and demand-response programs that help ensure reliable, affordable electricity for ODEC's 11 member distribution cooperatives. Following Plant Manager Floyd Lively's insightful presentation, a number of attendees stayed for a tour of the facility.



Louisa Generation Facility Plant Manager Floyd Lively (at left) with four participants following the Council's March 7 Annual Meeting.

Members in the news

On Jan 3, **Augusta Cooperative** announced that Brad Brown has been named Chief Executive Officer. Brown brings more than 17 years of senior management experience to his new role, previously serving as assistant general manager and retail operations/purchasing manager. Brad also leads Augusta Cooperative's wholesale division, Greener Valley Supply LLC, and played a key role in the company's development and launch of strategic plans to ensure flexibility in an increasingly demanding marketplace.

"Brad is the right leader for August Co-op," said co-op board President John Bowers. "His extensive agricultural management experience and business development skills will strengthen partnerships, develop strategic alliances and expand our sales presence." Brad has served three terms as Virginia Cooperative Council's president and remains an active board member; he also serves on the board of the Augusta County 4-H and FFA Market Animal Show & Sale. Founded in 1929, Augusta Cooperative serves over 25 counties in Virginia and West Virginia. To learn more, visit www.AugustaCoop.com or visit Augusta Cooperative Farm Bureau on Facebook.

Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative (MEC) implemented a brand refresh earlier this year, consisting of a redesigned website and new logo. Priscilla Whirley, MEC manager of communications and marketing, said their new website "is crafted to be faster, easier to navigate and more user friendly, with streamlined menus and a responsive layout for both mobile and desktop platforms." She explained that after learning that the red, green and yellow colors of their former logo were hard to distinguish between for people with sight problems, as well as triggering for those on the autism spectrum, they chose a blue and black palette that is ADA compliant and stands for what MEC represents: "Blue sends a message of trustworthiness, dependability and strength, while black conveys power and stability."



The Maryland & Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative Association (MDVA) recently partnered with Google and the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay to improve water quality in the Northern Virginia region. A \$230,000 contribution by Google funded the planting of more than 2,800 native hardwood trees along the streams of five Shenandoah Valley area dairy farms. Known as riparian buffers, these will reduce pollutants and runoff into the Potomac River Basin and Chesapeake Bay Watershed, while stabilizing eroding river and stream banks and improving biodiversity of the area by reducing the amount of nutrients and sediment entering the Rappahannock River watershed. Google, which owns data centers in Loudoun and Prince William counties, is committed to a climate-conscious approach to data-center cooling, and aims to replenish 120% of the freshwater volume consumed across its offices and data centers, while helping restore ecosystem health in the communities where it operates. "Partnerships like this one are helping our dairy farmer members make their sustainability goals a reality," said Lindsay Reams, executive vice president of sustainability and external relations for MDVA. To see the partnership in action, click on this [video link](#).

Have news from your co-op? Email mary.howell@scoop.com or send a message via the Council's Facebook page.

New worker co-op invites support

Submitted by Alex Burgard

Mindful Maker Co (no period!) is a manufacturing-worker cooperative starting up in the Shenandoah Valley, with an initial specialization in woodworking, fabrication and milling using a CNC router. Our flagship product is the Leaf Tree; a modular, expandable pet tree that requires no tools to assemble or rearrange, has no exposed plastics, uses formaldehyde-free wood, and has all-natural removable covers. Leaf Tree's design means pet owners can replace any individual piece, reducing costs and waste. We offer a trade-in program to make replacing parts more affordable while minimizing waste, since refurbished parts can be donated to nonprofits or resold.

Striving for supply-chain transparency is central to our cooperative purpose. We prioritize local, domestic and cooperative organizations and can identify gaps in the supply chain to fill by diversifying our manufacturing processes, such as supporting hemp production in our area.

We are seeking additional worker-owners, individuals wishing to financially support our manufacturing mission, and to connect with other Virginia co-ops to share expertise and experiences. Visit www.leaftree.co, mindfulmaker.co or email mindfulmakerco@gmail.com if you have any questions or are interested in details of investment. Thank you for your consideration!



Danny Harrison (left) with Alex Burgard, who welcomes support for their new Shenandoah Valley-based worker cooperative.

SVEC to host Co-op Month awards breakfast

Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative (SVEC) in Rockingham, VA will host the Council's Co-op Month breakfast on Tuesday, Oct. 1. Please mark your calendars and plan to bring several attendees from your cooperative! Our Awards Committee also invites nominations for the Career Cooperative Leadership Award and Young Cooperator Award, which comes with a \$500 stipend to the co-op of the recipient's choice. Email mary.howell@sscoop.com to request nomination forms.

Welcome new members!

BARC Electric Cooperative
Millboro, Va. www.barcelectric.com

Mindful Maker Cooperative
Rockingham County
www.mindfulmaker.co
www.leaftree.co

Executive Secretary's message: VICE just keeps getting better!

For the first year since the COVID-19 pandemic, we received a bumper crop of applications to the Virginia Institute on Cooperative Education at Graves Mountain Lodge, our 33rd year being hosted by the Graves family. With a few last-minute cancellations, a total of 45 students and six FFA state officers participated. I'm especially grateful for returning participants Katie Powell, Skyler Weaver, Grace Walbroehl, Jady Smith and Kirin Miller, who were experienced leaders for "Who's Minding the Store?" teams.

Cathy Statz, a lifelong educator and promoter of the cooperative way, was recommended by Fredericksburg Food Cooperative founder Rich LaRoche to help out, and added a wealth of perspective, information and ideas to our programs. Interestingly, the "True Colors" personality assessment revealed many more students than in past years with "green" traits, which include being logical and innovative. After ensuring each of our eight teams included students reflecting all four of the True Colors, we noticed how quickly each of the teams caught on to the principles of "Who's Minding the Store?" All teams had a significant degree of success and ended up with closer net worth than any previous group of students we can recall.

In addition to our three top-scorers who each earned scholarships, I'm delighted our first Allen Melton Memorial Scholarship recipient, Cameron Crews of Nathalie, Va., was an ideal candidate. Next year's VICE will be held March 21-23, 2025!

- Mary Howell

Young Farmers Award recipient pledges to grow organization

The Young Farmers of Virginia's 73rd convention was held Jan. 26-28 in Appomattox. As they have for many years, attendees enjoyed tours of area farms. This year's featured Sunnyside Farms produce, which includes a meat-goat operation, and Knoll Crest Farm, a fourth-generation cattle farm.

Gary Roy was presented with the Young Farmer Award, which Virginia Cooperative Council again sponsored. Roy is a Spotswood FFA alumni who owns a landscaping business in Harrisonburg. Currently leading the Young Farmers' Rockingham Chapter, he has teamed up with East Rock High School ag teacher Hannah Campbell to grow this organization.

"Because we're called Young Farmers, people think they have to be a farmer — or young — to join," explained Director Kaitlyn Sonifrank. "Because our mission is to continue ag education after high school, we welcome anyone interested to attend our meetings that provide information on agricultural issues facing their area. We strive to make connections between those starting out and those who've been in agriculture their entire lives," she said, welcoming Council members to attend their summer farm tours.



Gary Roy accepts the Young Farmers Award from Kaitlyn Sonifrank. To learn more about this organization, including their summer farm tours, email youngfarmersofva@gmail.com.

VICE, continued

Following three days of learning, teamwork, fun activities and great food, scholarship winners were announced. Zoey Berezansky of Virginia Beach, who profiled Colonial Farm Credit, was top scorer and earned \$2,000. Emory Seal of Mt. Solon and Audrey Garrison of Rockingham both profiled Rockingham Cooperative, earning \$1,500 and \$1,000 respectively. Cameron Crews of Nathalie profiled Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative and earned the \$500 Allen Melton Memorial Scholarship. These four are among the top 10 students who are invited on an expense-paid trip to the Georgia Cooperative Leadership Conference in July at Covington, Ga.

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The Virginia Foundation of Cooperation, Inc. welcomes tax-deductible contributions to support our education mission.

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