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Planting The Seeds Of Environmental Improvement

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DAYTON — Struggling to stay upright in deep, slippery mud along the aptly named Muddy Creek, Maria Loughran, a junior at the University of Virginia, carefully set her shovel aside after digging a hole deep enough to plant a young red oak tree.

Joining her was fellow U.Va. junior Sara Freeland and senior Gabriella Falcon. All three shared a laugh, and a big sigh of relief, when the task was finished.

"I like to do what I can to help," said Freeland, a member of the school's environmental science club, as the other two women grabbed a hammer and wooden stake to finish the job.

That scene, although somewhat less muddy in most cases, was repeated some 600 times on Saturday at Darrell Landes' 36-acre farm outside Dayton.

Last week, about 70 people came to the farm to start the first round of tree planting and about 50 volunteers returned on Saturday to finish the job.

The mass tree planting was organized by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and made possible largely through a \$30,000 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, part of the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. The Natural



Volunteers plant trees along Muddy Creek near Dayton for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. Bridgewater College freshman Pierrson Thomas, 18, hammers a support stake for a tree with classmates Brittany Kersey, 18, and Preston Isner, 19, along Muddy Creek Saturday. (Photos by Michael Reilly / DN-R)



Natalia Kavchak, 17, a Spotswood High senior, picks out a tulip poplar for planting Saturday.

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Resources Conservation Service and Shenandoah Valley Soil and Water Conservation District also lent support to the project.

'Just For Fun'

The volunteers planted nearly 20 different varieties of trees, including willow oaks, black walnut, bald cypress, white pine and red maples. The locations were chosen based on proximity to water and to create a balanced mature forest.



Colby Norris (left), 14, and Megan Harrigan, 14, both Warhill High School freshman from Williamsburg, place nets to keep birds out of the protective tubing for the trees Saturday.

Many of the participants were students looking to gain experience or course credits, but a few were also people from the community who just wanted to have a hand in improving the environment. They included Adrie Voors of Harrisonburg who traipsed around a 6-acre tract with a shovel for most of the morning.

"It's just for fun," Voors said as she leaned into her shovel for a bit more leverage against the compacted soil.

Despite the mud, a brisk breeze and a few rocks along the hillsides, nearly everyone agreed that the blue, clear skies and crisp fall temperatures made for an overall pleasant, not to mention rewarding, experience.

"It's a great day for this," said Jackson Cooper, a Spotswood High School senior. He and three other members of the SHS Environmental Science Club had planted 35 trees at the farm by noon.

Improvement Starts At Home

Organizers say about 90 percent of the trees planted in programs such as last week's mass planting usually survive, which is considered exceptional. Regardless of species, each tree is protected by a special biodegradable sleeve that protects it from the weather and animals and the program managers continue to monitor the trees until they're well established.

By early afternoon, at first glance, it appears the forest had already grown. Hundreds of pale green sleeves dotted the pasture and hillsides.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, runoff from farms in the form of excess nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment is contributing to pollution in the Chesapeake Bay. Experts say keeping livestock out of streams and protecting the banks of local waterways from erosion — which is stymied by riverbank trees — is an important strategy that will improve the bay's overall health.

Muddy Creek flows to the North River, which in turn flows to the South Fork of the Shenandoah River, a part of the Potomac River watershed, key components of the Chesapeake Bay's source waters.

Libby Norris, a watershed restoration scientist with the bay foundation, praised Landes and other Valley farmers for being proactive in working with federal water quality improvement guidelines. Still, she added, there are some farmers who are holding out, discouraged by the extra time, effort and money the measures require. Others are waiting until the dust settles on ever-evolving state and federal water quality standards before deciding how to proceed.

"A lot of them say, 'I'll do it when I have to,'" Norris said. "Well, that day is coming soon."

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Improving the bay is a cooperative effort, one in which it's crucial to realize how seemingly far-flung regions are connected, she said.

"If you can't save the headwaters, you can't save the bay," Norris said.

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