

Tobacco Child Employment Bill Dies in Committee

ANDREW JENNER
Virginia Correspondent

RICHMOND, Va. — A bill that would have banned Virginia tobacco farmers from employing minors other than their own children or grandchildren died in committee earlier this month.

Del. Alfonso Lopez, D-Arlington, said his bill was intended to protect the health and safety of child workers on tobacco farms.

Last year, the watchdog group Human Rights Watch published a report scrutinizing the working conditions of children employed on tobacco farms in several states, including Virginia. The report alleged that, among other hazards, child workers who handle tobacco plants often suffer symptoms of a form of nicotine poisoning called green tobacco sickness.

Just three of the 141 children interviewed by Human Rights Watch were employed in Virginia. Several tobacco growers told *Lancaster Farming* that very few children in Virginia outside of farmers' immediate families work in the industry.

Lopez wrote the exception into the bill to allow farmers' children and grandchildren to work on tobacco farms because he didn't want to interfere with family farming traditions.

"I don't know of anyone who uses child or teenaged labor" from outside the family. "It's very rare," said Don Anderson, who grows 80 acres of tobacco in Halifax County. "I think the bill was well-intentioned, but it was unneeded."

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Photo by Dana Gochenour

Sam Truban of Woodstock, Va., tries out one of the tractors on display at the recent Virginia No-Till Conference.

Farmer Talks 'Farming in Nature's Image'

DANA GOCHENOUR
Virginia Correspondent

HARRISONBURG, Va. — Kansas crop farmer Gail Fuller's success has not come as the result of a good growing season or the latest model tractor.

The keynote speaker at the Virginia No-Till Alliance Winter Conference on Feb. 3, Fuller admitted that he didn't start seeing a turn-

around on his farm until he stopped fighting Mother Nature.

"Mother Nature always wins," Fuller said.

"Erosion was a huge problem on my farm," he added, noting that some of his fields lost inches of soil at a time during heavy rains.

In the 1980s, Fuller made a move to no-till, but added, "I was too arrogant to ask for help, so we went

back to conventional till."

Though he was unhappy with the results of his initial foray into no-till, Fuller said he realized something had to change if he wanted to have a sustainable farm to pass on to his children.

"After going through the '80s and '90s watching my farm wash away, I decided I could not take it anymore," he said.

Since then, Fuller has cultivated an approach he calls "farming in nature's image," where he combines no-till methods with highly diverse cover crops, companion crops growing in-season with cash crops, and utilizing livestock in the crop rotation. Over time, soil tests have proved that Fuller is building organic matter and increasing the water

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Councill Family Inducted Into Governor's Ag Hall of Fame

JAMIE CLARK TIRALLA
Maryland Correspondent

GLEN BURNIE, Md. — The Councill family of Talbot County became the 46th recipient of Maryland's highest agriculture honor as they were inducted into the Governor's Agricultural Hall of Fame at the annual Taste of Maryland Agriculture event.

Gov. Larry Hogan praised the conservation efforts of the Councill family as well as other farmers across the state at the Feb. 5 event, held at Michael's Eighth Avenue in Glen Burnie.

Phil "Chip" Councill Jr. and his wife, Jo Ann, accepted the award on behalf of the family. In a video presentation, Phil Councill said, "There aren't many industries where the whole family gets to work side by side."

Councill is the 10th generation in a long line of farmers. His ancestors came from England in 1690 and settled in the Cordova area of Talbot — about four miles from where he lives today.

"Our roots run deep," he said.

There have been many transitions in operations since then. Councill

said his grandfather had a dairy and his father, Phil Councill Sr., raised hogs. He and his father transitioned from hogs into grain, which is still the primary business of the farm. The Councill family has 1,000 acres of tillable land and 800 acres of timber.

"Grain is still the primary and most important land use in my opinion. I don't think the poultry industry could make it without grain farmers. And without a doubt, grain farmers in the state of Maryland could not make it without the poultry."

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Submitted photo

Acting Maryland Agriculture Secretary Joe Bartenfelder, far right, and Gov. Larry Hogan present Chip and Jo Ann Councill with the state's top agricultural honor. The Councill family was joined by their family, from left: Jason Dodd, Melissa Councill Dodd, Jason Councill, Phil Councill Sr. and Casey Councill.



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Virginia No-Till Alliance President Mark Deavers welcomes everyone to the organization's annual winter conference in Harrisonburg on Feb.



Attendees explore the equipment displays at the Virginia No-Till Conference.

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holding capacity of his soils, while decreasing the amount of fertilizer and pesticides needed on his fields. While adopting new methods or trying new crops might seem scary, Fuller insists those things are trivial in the end. "Calibrating the drill is easy. Making a (seed) mix is easy," he said. "The hard part is changing the

mindset." Fuller said farmers should also strive to enjoy life more and focus on why they farm, not just how. "We grow food," he said, "and don't let anybody tell you differently. We do not grow commodities. We grow food." For anyone debating the benefits of cover crops in comparison to their associated costs, Fuller reminded that there is also a dollar value associated with every ton of soil lost due to erosion. Even his

most conservative estimates show that he lost money. "When we put a focus on the soil first, the money will follow," Fuller said. Fellow presenter Gerard Troisi agreed with Fuller's mantra of keeping the emphasis on soil. Troisi is a private crop advisor in central Pennsylvania who touts reduced soil disturbance, high diversity, continuous crop growth and integration of livestock as the main principles of soil health improvement. Perhaps the biggest difference in Troisi's cover cropping strategy is that he encourages his clients to wait until after planting the next crop to kill down cover crops rather than do it before spring planting. "Cover crops need not be terminated in advance of the crop seed-

ing date," Troisi said, noting that planting in live cover "maximizes cover crop advantages." He cautioned though that equipment modifications such as removing the row cleaners and spike closers from planters have to be made for the method to work. Dairy producer Philip Whitmer agreed that planting through cover crops can be difficult. But on his farm, the benefits often outweigh the risks. Whitmer's Grazeland Dairy, located in Ottobine, Va., is certified organic, which limits his options for chemical use. To get around the need for chemical herbicides, Whitmer relies on heavy, thick stands of cover crops to smother out weeds. He then rolls the cover crops down and plants into them. "Our only alternative" to planting into cover crops "is cultivation," he said. Whatever the reason for planting cover crops, Fuller reminded the audience to not let cover crops become an afterthought. "You have to plan ahead and make" cover crops "part of your rotation," he said, adding that producers should take a hands-on approach. "Be observant. Walk your fields. Get out there and dig with your spade. And don't be afraid to fail. If there's a mistake to make in farming, I've done it," he said. *Dana Gochenour is a freelance writer in western Virginia.*

Va. 4-H'ers Excel in National Livestock Skillathon

BLACKSBURG, Va. — Virginia's 4-H Livestock Skillathon Team placed first at the recent National 4-H Livestock Skillathon Contest during the North American International Livestock Exposition in Louisville, Ky.

The Virginia team was competitive in all categories, placing first in evaluation and quality assurance, and second in identification, and all of the team members placed in the top four overall. This was the third time in three years that a team from Virginia has won the contest.

The Virginia team included Simon Liggett of Mount Solon, first place; Cole Leonard of Greenville, second place; Jake McCall of Greenville, third place; and Cassidy Simmons of Spring Hill, fourth place.

Eric Stogdale of Verona served as the team's coach.

Overall, Virginia's team scored 1,685 points and beat 17 other teams. Tennessee placed second and Maryland placed third.

Skillathon is a knowledge-based competition in meat and animal sciences. 4-H members compete in a series of individual and team activities in multiple areas of livestock production.

During the team portion, the members worked together to analyze different feed rations, work a group of lambs, market a group of carcasses, make breeding decisions for a flock, evaluate a class of live hogs and defend their selections to a judge. Individual activities included hay judging, wool judging, breed identification, equipment identification, meats identification and a quality assurance exercise.

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