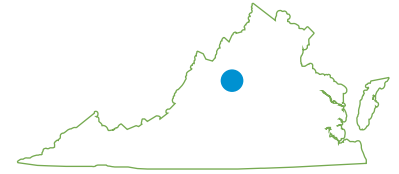


# Profile: **Albemarle County**



## Teaming Up to Spread the Word about Conservation

The Thomas Jefferson Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) serves four counties in central Virginia, including Albemarle County. This SWCD offers both financial and technical support to farmers to help advance on-the-ground conservation. In recent years, SWCDs have received an influx of state conservation dollars—sometimes receiving so much money that they have trouble spending it all. In 2020, with this funding influx on the horizon, the Thomas Jefferson SWCD teamed up with Albemarle County to hire an outreach-focused staff person to spread the word about conservation opportunities in the agricultural community.



THOMAS JEFFERSON SWCD

### Situation

Albemarle County is in the Piedmont region of central Virginia, roughly 60 miles northwest of Richmond and 100 miles southwest of Washington, D.C. The county is home to the historic city of Charlottesville, where the University of Virginia is located. When combined, Charlottesville and Albemarle County have a total population of roughly 160,000 people. The area features a combination of rural and urban landscapes with rolling hills and beautiful vistas. In many ways, Albemarle's economy, landscape, and culture remain heavily influenced by agriculture.

According to the [2022 Census of Agriculture](#), Albemarle is home to about 860 farms, down five percent from 2017. Most of these farms—65 percent—are 10-179 acres in size. While production systems are diverse and varied, vegetables, fruits and berries, and hay, as well as horses and sheep, are particularly important to the county's

agricultural economy. The diverse agricultural landscape includes cropland, pastureland, and woodland, with the latter two categories covering slightly more acreage.

Given the high number of farms in the county, there is ample opportunity to pursue conservation opportunities and promote stewardship of natural resources. In Virginia, as elsewhere in the U.S., [Soil and Water Conservation Districts \(SWCDs\)](#) are leaders in this work. SWCDs are political subdivisions established to conserve and protect natural resources, including soil, water, and other related ecosystems. Essentially the grassroots of conservation, district staff work with landowners and communities to develop and implement conservation plans and practices, tailoring their services to meet local needs and priorities.

The [Thomas Jefferson SWCD](#) serves Albemarle and three other counties in the area. It is one of the largest SWCDs in Virginia, covering nearly 2,000 square miles.

THOMAS JEFFERSON SWCD



Over the years, they have been receiving more and more money from the state to deliver both technical and financial assistance to farmers to enhance their conservation efforts. The money is welcomed, and it's making a huge impact—but it can at times be difficult to get “on the ground.”

To address this challenge, the Thomas Jefferson SWCD teamed up with Albemarle County in 2020 to conduct strategic—and effective—conservation outreach, aligned with both of their goals and visions.

## Approach

In 2019, leaders at the Thomas Jefferson SWCD knew that a tremendous influx of new state funding was on the horizon. Previously, their SWCD received roughly \$700,000 per year, which had recently increased to \$1 million. The funding then jumped to \$3 million—and now more than \$7 million per year. Looking at the horizon back then, they realized that they needed a strategy to enhance their outreach and take steps to spend this money wisely in pursuit of their conservation goals.

Anne Coates, who serves as the Executive Director of the Thomas Jefferson SWCD, went to Albemarle County leaders with a bold idea to fund an outreach position for her team. Doing so would enable a full-time staff person to focus exclusively on raising awareness about the conservation opportunities available to farmers. This person could do in-person outreach and events. They could improve the SWCD's social media presence. They could support the newsletter and help create a communications strategy. They could, in short, get more farmers interested in conservation and help put more funding on the ground.

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**ANNE COATES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
THOMAS JEFFERSON SOIL AND WATER  
CONSERVATION DISTRICT**

“We were in frequent enough communication with [Albemarle County leaders] that we understood their priorities and goals,” says Coates. “I said to them, ‘This is outside money coming into your community, and it's a lot of it.’ I just happened to mention that we were going from receiving \$1 million a year to more than \$3 million a year to support conservation in our district, and I wasn't sure how we'd get all that new money out the door.”

According to Coates, their response was: “Well, maybe we can help.”

Crucially, Coates and her team were willing to compromise. When Albemarle leaders asked about the cost of a position like this, Coates explained that the role did not necessarily have to be “permanent.” They could make the new outreach position a one-year role, which was more palatable to the county from a funding standpoint yet still helpful for the SWCD in that current moment. Plus, it would lay the foundation for improved outreach and conservation communication in the future. Coates emphasized that this small local investment would help put state funds to use in the county, which was a major selling point.

Ultimately, Albemarle County agreed to fund the one-year outreach position, in part because they decided to use stormwater planning funds to cover costs since improved conservation practices would help address these issues. Coates and others from the Thomas Jefferson SWCD worked with county leaders to design the job description, and then they posted the role. They hired their outreach coordinator in early 2020, just a few weeks before the Covid-19 pandemic began.



Immediately, the outreach coordinator began to assess communication efforts with other staff members. She saw that their outreach efforts were not coordinated. Multiple different staff members were sending out different messages to the public at the same time, drowning out each other's reach and, as Coates said, "stepping on each other's toes." The coordinator helped create a communications calendar to ensure that different outreach messages did not overlap or conflict.

Further, the coordinator, in partnership with program staff members, created an annual list of timely topics. "We realized that, as part of our outreach, you really have to put information out when the farmer needs to see it—not just at any random time," Coates explains. "We started to make sure our messages were synced up with on-the-ground things that were happening. Is it hay cutting season? If it is, let's share information about how we can help farmers in that process. If it's not hay cutting season, let's not do a social media post about that."

That insight may sound simple—but for a team so maxed out with programmatic responsibilities, having someone to develop a communications strategy was a huge improvement.

The outreach coordinator also dove deeper into social media engagement, a tool that has become more popular with farmers. They did a [series of posts](#) about agricultural conservation practices and the ways that the SWCD could help farmers learn more and implement their own conservation strategies. They led traditional efforts, too: posting flyers in gas stations and farm stores, placing brochures at the public libraries, and including stories in their newsletters. They collected analytics on

all this outreach, helping them further refine their communications strategies.

## Outcomes

The Albemarle County-funded outreach position at Thomas Jefferson SWCD only lasted one year—but the impacts continue to be felt today.

"Traditionally, word of mouth has been our biggest outreach tool," mentions Coates. Making sure people are satisfied with service and then encouraging them to tell their friends and neighbors is a tried-and-true method. Before they created the outreach position, Coates estimates that more than 90 percent of the calls and emails they received from farmers and landowners came because of word-of-mouth outreach. Thanks to the coordinator, engagement began to change. "In the most recent survey analysis we did, where we asked people to let us know how they heard about our work,

only about 60–70 percent was from word of mouth. The rest came from other methods, like social media. That's still a lot for word of mouth," she says, "but the numbers suggest that we're reaching more people in different ways."

The most impressive outcome of the coordinator's diverse outreach was to help get the increased state funding on the ground. Nowadays, there is no shortage, says Coates, of people who want to work with their district. This helps them achieve their conservation practice adoption goals and leads to more positive impacts. Given the rapid rise in state funding amounts and the number of trained staff it takes to deliver assistance, Thomas Jefferson SWCD still struggles on occasion



THOMAS JEFFERSON SWCD



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to spend all their allocated conservation dollars—but it is not because of poor outreach or because of limited awareness.

Plus, even though the funding for the full-time position has now gone away, Coates was able to set aside funds and time for one of her team members to focus part of their work on communications and outreach. Because of the former full-time outreach role, they are now able to do so with a foundation in place and a successful strategy to reference.

### Lessons Learned

Coates has advice for others who want to advance on-the-ground conservation from the local level. Most importantly, she says that districts and localities need to work together to figure out what their needs are. “At that time in 2019–2020, I needed an outreach person because I was getting more money coming in. The staff that I have that are really good at being in the field—I couldn’t pull them in and say, ‘Can you sit around for half the day and do social media posts?’ No, I need them to do what they’re good at. I think for me, it’s knowing your district and your needs.”

Another lesson relates to relationships. That was really the key, Coates said, in partnering with Albemarle County on this effort. “We have a long-standing relationship with them. So when we pitched this idea, it wasn’t a cold call. It was built on the success of other programs.”

Coates’ final “lesson learned” is a word of caution: “Outreach can be a double-edged sword.” People are now well aware of how the Thomas Jefferson SWCD can serve them—and their office gets lots of calls. “We’re at a point now,” she says, “where we could do no outreach and still have our phones ringing off the hook!” Having the staff capacity to respond to the results of effective outreach can be a challenge, but it is a good one to have.

For local leaders who want to support on-the-ground conservation, creative partnerships with SWCDs can be a productive path forward. When rooted in existing relationships, new efforts have a chance to thrive.



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