

Guide for Conducting “Conservation Speed-Dating Workshops”

Guide developed by the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative and the Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative

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Overview:

- The overarching goal for these workshops is to introduce landowners and producers to their *local* technical service providers (TSPs), their expertise, and the full suite of (technical and financial) resources, knowledge, and programs they can provide. The strength of this event comes from having these TSPs and CPs engage one-on-one with each participant discussing how their programs apply specifically to each landowner's property and conservation goals, using a large, hard-copy map of each property as a focal point for discussion.

Meeting Objectives:

- To introduce new landowners and producers to local TSPs and the types of support and assistance they can provide.
- To initiate one-on-one conservation planning between a diverse group of TSPs and new landowners and producers.
- To catalyze both short and long-term conservation action on working landscapes.
- To send participants home with an informative and inspirational roadmap for adding more conservation practices to their landscapes/operations, and armed with the knowledge of who to follow up with and what incentives/programming/cost-share is available to support them.

Additional Wins:

- The event creates an opportunity for TSPs to spend some time together, and therefore a chance to learn about / receive updates on each other's programs and better understand what each other do.
- These make for great training events for TSPs! If your organization is newly onboarding staff, they can easily shadow a more seasoned member of your organization during these events.
- Neighbors are meeting neighbors—sometimes for the first time—at these events. Relationships are developed or reinforced around a shared interest in land stewardship, and landowners can network with each other over their conservation goals.

Event outline:

- ~3 hours is a good amount of time for these workshops. Any shorter and they feel rushed. Any longer and you might be taking up too much of peoples' time. Consider a morning (9am-noon) option, afternoon option (1-4pm), or an evening (4-7pm) option.
- Prep: arrange tables so that they are conducive for speed-dating; lay out the property maps; add pens, pencils, and markers to each table.
- TSPs should arrive earlier than participants. This gives them time to lay out some of their handouts and also allows them to greet participants as they arrive.
- Participants arrive, light refreshments are made available, folks get settled with some light socializing.
- The host/moderator kicks off the meeting, bringing everyone together, introducing themselves and providing the general structure, ground rules, and goals for the meeting.
- Round-robins / lightning talks — two options here:
 - Round-robin: [we have found these to be the most effective and easiest lift] The event moderator begins a simple round-robin wherein each TSP and participant introduces themselves. Think 20-30 seconds per person, maximum. For TSPs: name, organization, maybe a BMP you're excited about promoting. For participants: Name, Farm Name, something they're excited to learn about.
 - Lightning talks: TSPs introduce themselves with 1-3 powerpoint slides. This takes more time, but for smaller events can work well. These are usually 3 minutes long at most, accompanied by 1-3 slides if a projector is available. These lightning talks allow participants to connect a name and organization with a face.
- Speed-Dating begins: landowners are directed to find their maps and take a seat at a table (landowners will remain with their maps at the same table throughout the event).

- Everyone then transitions into the heart of the workshop—a “speed-dating” format during which TSPs rotate around the room, spending one-on-one time (~7-10 mins) with each participant (~10-15 landowners total) talking through different best management practices (and associated cost-share programs) that could be implemented on their properties. The really fun, engaging, and effective part about this is that these conversations happen over a large (24”x36”) color map that each participant receives of their property. TSPs and participants are able to sketch out ideas directly onto the map (e.g., where to build a riparian buffer, where to potentially target some native warm season grass plantings, where a water trough could be positioned once cattle are excluded from a stream, etc.).
 - There are, of course, a lot of nuances in a property that a map cannot portray, which means that recommendations given during speed-dating should focus on generating conceptual ideas as well as encouraging landowners to think about their properties in new ways. The expectation is that landowners interested in certain BMPs that are discussed with them will then follow up with TSPs about a site visit and next steps.
- Depending on the number of participants, consider a brief lunch or snack intermission during the speed-dating, or wait to serve food until the end.
- Allow time for socializing, follow up conversation, and contact information sharing at the end of the event.

Preparation:

1. Find a suitable venue. This should be a covered space with 10-15 tables, electricity, and (potentially) the capacity to use a projector can be helpful, and available restrooms.
 - a. While these events can certainly be held any time of year, they can lend themselves well to an indoor winter event, providing an opportunity for landowners to get excited about new management ideas to move forward with in the Spring.
 - b. It can be simpler to find and team up with an exemplar landowner who has a space to use. The landowner can also help advertise the event to neighbors when that time comes.
2. Round up all of the local technical service providers.
 - a. Generate a list of all of the TSPs specific to the geography where you will be advertising the event.
 - i. *****The scale/geography targeted is very important.** Any bigger than county-wide may prove challenging and ineffective (and note that TSPs and CPs often change between counties). Neighborhood, community, or watershed-size will probably work best. Consider targeting a subwatershed scale.
 - ii. Example organizations to include: NRCS, SWCD, VA Cooperative Extension, FSA, American Farmland Trust, DOF, DEQ, Land Trusts, Friends of [water group], Chesapeake Bay Foundation, other relevant non profits.
3. Find a date and time that works for as many of the TSPs as possible.
 - a. This is probably the most challenging part of planning these events, and the reason why you will want to plan the workshop 2-3 months from the time you begin contacting these TSPs.
4. Begin advertising to landowners noting the comment about scale/geography above. Sometimes it is best to not broadcast the net too far, but rather target small, community-scale participation. Neighbors inviting neighbors, or having the host landowner invite neighbors can work well.
5. As participants register for the event, have them email over their property plats, addresses, tax map numbers, or other way to find their property and then print it. Saving Google Earth images as pdfs is the easiest and best way to maintain high resolution maps that will be blown up to a larger size.
6. Create a slidedeck template that includes room for the map, the farm info, the full list of TSPs for that geography, and room for notes. See the example below.
7. 2’x3’ maps work well and can be printed off most plotters. Consider printing onto a non-glossy, thicker poundage paper (36 lb works well) so that the maps are more robust and will survive the interaction they’ll receive during the workshop.
8. Organize the food (e.g., coffee and snacks upon arrival, lunch, catering, etc.).
9. Have TSPs email you 1-3 pptx slides that you can then compile for the lightning talks, if desired.

