

# Easements On Farm Bureau Panel Agenda

## More Flexible System To Be Reviewed

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**HARRISONBURG** — Farmers interested in securing a conservation easement on their property have a new system that should provide for more flexibility.

Everyone in rural areas could feel the lasting impact.

“Part of the reason so many people are choosing to live [in Rockingham County] is the rural landscape and agricultural area,” said Lisa Anne Hawkins, a founding partner of the Lenhart Obenshain PC law firm in Harrisonburg. “You have to make sure you’re doing things to preserve and protect that.”

Hawkins will be one of three panelists discussing the benefits of conservation easements to farmers during the Virginia Farm Bureau Federation’s annual convention scheduled for Tuesday through Thursday in Norfolk. Broadway resident Matt Lohr, commissioner of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, will moderate the discussion.

For more than a year, Hawkins and others have studied potential changes to the template for obtaining a conservation easement. It led the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the largest easement holder in the state, to adopt a farm variance.

The changes will be unveiled at the convention. The three-day event is titled “Ag Trade: Growing Opportunities” and has numerous activities planned.

As many as 900 farmers and others are expected to attend, according to a news release.

### **Fear Of Forever**

Hawkins said conservation easements are not something everyone is open to. Some farmers, she said, fear committing to something that will last forever, and some have an “innate distrust” of the government, which holds most easements.

But those who do take advantage of the program receive tax benefits and ensure their farmland is kept intact for generations.

To make easements more attractive this year, especially for Rockingham County

farmers, Hawkins' work group recommended creating a "farmstead" for a farmer's property.

In the past, the size and number of buildings a working farm could have with a conservation easement was limited. A farmstead area would be a designated portion that allows farmers to build when expansion is necessary, Hawkins said.

In Rockingham County, that's a "huge" change, she said.

Unlike many Northern Virginia farms with easements, Valley farmers are producing poultry and dairy and are in need of greater infrastructure, Hawkins said. Also, farms in the region tend to be smaller, she said.

Another change that adds flexibility to easements is a review of a property on a case-by-case basis, instead of a minimum requirement of 100 acres.

"We're hoping for working farms to be preserved," Hawkins said.

### **Interest Growing**

Laura Thurman is the easement project manager for the Virginia Outdoors Foundation's office covering the Shenandoah Valley. She also will participate in the convention's panel discussion.

This year, the foundation has recorded five easements in Rockingham County. Thurman said that was encouraging because there have been recent years where there were none.

Heading into this year, her agency had 18 easements in Rockingham, a low number given the amount of agriculture production in it, she said.

According to the Farm Bureau, the county is first in the state in turkey and chicken broiler production and dairy cows, and second only to Augusta County in beef cattle.

With the new template, more local farmland used for those purposes may continue in that capacity.

"I hope that it helps," Thurman said. "It's such a heavy agricultural county, but [easements] have been so light."

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