Welcome to Our New VDACS Pesticide Investigator

Welcome to our New VDACS Pesticide Inspector: Nikita Higgins! Born and raised in the upper Midwest, Nikita earned a Bachelor of Science in Natural Resources at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. After college, Nikita was an Agroforestry Peace Corps Volunteer in Paraguay, where she met her husband, Doug, whom you may know as Dr. Higgins, our own Eastern Shore AREC Assistant Professor of Plant Pathology.

Before working for VDACS, Nikita was in the world of greenhouse production of native plants, tree seedlings and ornamentals.

She also controlled invasive plant species and worked as a forest consultant, developing forest stewardship management plans for landowners. Coming from Michigan, Nikita (and Doug) have made a home here on the Eastern Shore with family, enjoying canoeing, hiking and eating seafood. Nikita is looking forward to working with our producers and pesticide applicators on the Eastern Shore as well as Norfolk and Virginia Beach.
Accomack and Northampton County ANR agents, Theresa and Helene, recently met to discuss programmatic needs for both counties, laying out a tentative calendar for 2024. Tentative project areas will include:

- Small Farm workshop series
- Specialist Days
- Pesticide Recertification Classes
- Ag Economics workshop
- Marketing/Social Media workshops
- Pesticide and WPS Trainings
- Household Water Testing
- Pesticide container recycling
- Food safety classes.

**What are your needs?**

**Let us know!**

**Agents’ Statistics to Date:**

- Pesticide License Recertifications: 84
- Pesticide License Exams Proctoring: 8

**Agents’ Calendar:**

- March 5th: Eastern Shore Master Gardener Executive Board Meeting
- March 6th/7th: Produce Safety Alliance Agent Training
- March 12th: VCE SE District Unit Coordinator Meeting
- March 13th: ES Master Gardener Entomology Training
- March 14th: Dicamba (8am), Parqat/Gramoxone (10am) Training
- March 18th-24th: Ag in the Classroom with Farm Bureau
- March 19th: Judging entries for the Eastern Shore Envirothon
- March 20th/21st: SMALL FARM WORKSHOP
- March 25th and 26th: Food Safety Agent Training
- March 26th: Touring a commercial kitchen in Farmville, VA

**On-Going VCE Efforts in March:**

- Slug Trapping Research to evaluate slug population density.
- Potato on-farm trial evaluating the efficacy of current insecticides for the control of wireworms.
- Selection of corn varieties for field corn variety trial to be planted in early April at the ESAREC.
- Planning of “Raising Quality and Large Sized Vegetables for Fair Competition” Workshop
- Connecting sweet corn growers with ESAREC plant pathology graduate student for on-farm spring trials
- Abstract submission for 2024 International Soil Tillage Organisation Conference (“Eastern Shore ANR Programs: working for Virginia’s #1 agricultural communities”)
- Hiring Committee Interviews for ESAREC Assistant Farm Manager

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How do I start a farm if I have some land?

Answer: First step is to reach out to your local FSA and get registered for a farm number, fill out a CCC-860 to determine eligibility for beginner farmer programs and get connected to the USDA by signing up for emails. Next: Reach out to VCE Extension agents for resources on production!

MARCH 2024

**ACCOMACK & NORTHAMPTON PRODUCERS**

**DON'T MISS THE DEADLINE FOR NATURAL DISASTER ASSISTANCE**

Drought conditions affected many of Virginia’s agricultural producers in numerous localities and all parts of the state during the 2023 growing season. This natural disaster assistance includes FSA emergency loans. Provided eligibility requirements are met, the FSA will assess each emergency loan application individually and will consider specific circumstances and needs.

Farmers in Accomack and Northampton counties have eight months from the date of the disaster declaration to apply for emergency loans.

Producers should contact their county’s FSA Service Center for more information on this designation, services available, date of declaration and application deadline.
Please join us for an Eastern Shore Small Farm Workshop on Wednesday, March 20th & Thursday, March 21st.

Features speakers from the Virginia Tech ESAREC, Virginia Tech Food Science and Technology department, VDACS Marketing department, Beekeeping Guild, and Virginia State University Small Farm & Animal Production programs.

The workshop is FREE but requires registration (as space is limited)

VISIT THIS LINK TO REGISTER

Lunch is provided and sponsored by the Association of Eastern Virginia Agricultural Producers, Inc, Farm Credit and Northampton Farm Bureau.

We are looking forward to seeing you at the workshop and engaging in conversations to improve, diversify and support your farms!

THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS
**Director’s Update**

It’s potato planting time! We look forward to starting the Spring 2024 field season and expanding our portfolio of applied research to help Virginia growers prosper. We are also busy writing grants to fund our research, so let us know if you would like to participate in on-farm trials or have an interesting research idea to solve a problem that you are encountering.

**ESAREC Hiring Plans**

Hiring is also in full swing as we are currently interviewing for two positions at the Eastern Shore AREC. We are currently conducting online interviews for both our Assistant Farm Manager and Applied Entomologist position.

The Assistant Farm Manager position was promoted to Farm Manager. The entomology position will aim to fill the void left when Helene Doughty moved to serve Northampton County as Virginia Cooperative Extension’s Agriculture and Natural Resources agent.

Stay tuned for ways to interact with our Entomologist search as candidates visit the Eastern Shore and Virginia Tech’s main campus over the coming months. We will also make the candidate’s seminar available remotely for those of you not local to the Eastern Shore of Virginia.
James Warren Retires after 51 Years of Service

Mr. James Warren, Mechanic and Master of many trades, has retired from the Eastern Shore AREC after 51 years of dedicated service. James has driven, repaired, patched, introduced, retired, and had his hands on every piece of equipment the station has seen in those many years, often being the only person knowing the obscure or hard to find parts that were needed for repairs or where every tool, bolt or implement was located. James has mentored a many students and summer interns in the ways of the Eastern Shore AREC, not just guiding them and teaching them in the ways of field work, but making sure they minded their manners by “speaking” every morning and bringing them in the conversation. He loved to teach interns how to drive the oldest tractor on the station, a 1952 Ford 8N, to help with laying irrigation pipes. James’ teaching was always done with a good dose of laughter and patience. Mr. Warren was always patient and meticulous, he wanted to get it done right and always communicated well with everyone to ensure great field conditions existed and for optimal trial results. James had a many stories and anecdotes over the years that he retold faithfully during break time over a soda and a pack of nab, or pulling sweet potato slips out of the sand boxes, or while riding on the 2-person transplanter. He was always willing to lend a hand to anyone, even after work hours, helping to fix summer interns’ cars or changing the oil for them. James never missed an Eastern Shore AREC event, was the quintessential employee, and no get together was ever complete without his mirthful laugh. If you see James around, congratulate him on his well-deserved retirement!

Do you want to leave James a well wish for his retirement? Click HERE!
Dr. Mark Reiter was awarded the 2023-2024 Alumni Award winner as Outstanding Alumni in the Global Community by the School of Plant and Environmental Sciences (SPES) at Virginia Tech. Mark was nominated by Dr. Ozzie Abaye for his work around the globe to promote agricultural education and applied research regarding best management practices for soils and nutrient management. Mark currently serves as President of the International Soil Tillage Research Organization, whose main mission is to promote contacts among scientists undertaking research in soil tillage and field traffic and their relationship with the soil environment, land use and crop production; to stimulate scientific research in the domain of soil tillage and related fields; and to further the application of the results of such research into agricultural practice. Mark also co-leads study abroad programs and promotes agronomic concepts related to food security throughout several countries in Africa. Mark graduated with his B.S. in Crop and Soil Environmental Sciences from Virginia Tech in May 2001. Dr. Reiter will be recognized as the SPES award winner at the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Alumni Organization’s (CALSAMO) celebration of Ut Prosim in April.

ISTRO 2024 SPONSORSHIP & PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

I personally invite you to attend and sponsor the 22nd International Soil Tillage Research Organisation (ISTRO) Conference. Your sponsorship will showcase your company’s dedication to service the agricultural industry around the world.

This event will cover many topic areas and unite up to 300 attendees from over 25 countries, resulting in extensive international visibility, engagement and collaborations.

Our event will serve as a venue for researchers, graduate students, industry, government, and farmers to present and discuss soil health, cover crop and residue systems, crop protection, regenerative agriculture, and many other topics, around the theme “Living Roots, Living Soil”, as well as build collaborations and networking efforts.
Planning began in April 2023 to secure the Wyndham Virginia Beach Oceanfront Resort as ISTRO 2024’s venue. Currently, abstract submissions and reviews are underway until the March 15th deadline, early bird registration until April 1st, and sponsorship requests. The conference is to take place over 5 days from September 23rd to 27th with features and events including a general session with a renowned keynote speaker, concurrent daily sessions covering 7 submission topics, poster sessions, multiple networking events, a tour of agriculture of the Eastern Shore and Virginia Beach and a dinner banquet on the Spirit of Norfolk.

For more information on ISTRO 2024, including abstract submission, registration and sponsorship, click HERE
RESEARCH FROM ESAREC FACULTY & STAFF

US Court Bans Dicamba Products but Growers can use Existing Stocks in 2024

Dr. Vijay Singh, Assistant Professor & Extension Specialist, Weed Science

Recently, a U.S. court banned three herbicides (with dicamba active ingredient) widely used in soybean and cotton systems, considering that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) violated the law by not following guidelines and allowing them to be on the market. The court has taken a stance where it emphasized that comments and concerns of state agriculture agencies, specialty farmers, and stakeholders were not considered by EPA while allowing the use of dicamba.

The ruling impacts Bayer’s dicamba-based XtendiMax herbicide, Syngenta’s Tavium and BASF’s Engenia herbicide. The affected companies are assessing legal options to respond. Meanwhile, EPA has allowed the use of existing stock orders of dicamba products as explained below.

Farmers and conservation groups against dicamba commercialization highlighted that dicamba can cause massive and unprecedented harm to farms as well as endangering plants and pollinators. These herbicides can volatilize and move long distances when temperatures climb. Dicamba is prone to drift and it can move into drainage water as runoff after rain.

Farmers have few other options in place of affected dicamba products, example, the Enlist soybean system that uses 2,4-D for weed control. Other options are either Roundup Ready or Liberty-Link Soybeans. Growers are suggested to use Liberty-Link soybeans if they have significant issues of glyphosate/ Roundup – resistant weeds. Growers can use cultivars that allow use of both Roundup and Liberty. We do not have any reported case of glufosinate (Liberty)-resistant weeds in Virginia.

However, growers can still use existing dicamba products which include dicamba product already in the possession of distributors, co-ops, and other parties for sales and shipped before February 6, 2024 or listed within set guidelines outlined in the order. The end users of existing stocks in Virginia must use the formerly-registered products consistent with the previously approved labeling for the products, and must cease use of these products by June 30 for dicamba tolerant soybean, and July 30 for dicamba tolerant Cotton. Those who are planning to use existing dicamba products in 2024, must fulfill dicamba training requirements in Virginia. In this regard, a training session will be offered on: Thursday, March 14th, 2024, at the Eastern Shore AREC in Painter, Va.

MARCH 2024
Cover Crop Seeding Using Unmanned Aerial Systems or Aerial Drone

Dr. Vijay Singh, Assistant Professor & Extension Specialist, Weed Science

Unmanned Aerial Systems or aerial drones are changing our agricultural practices and becoming a part of smart farming systems. Several growers and drone manufacturers in Mid-Atlantic region are evaluating drone-based cover crop and wheat seeding options.

Operations conducted in 2023 at growers’ farms provided exciting observations and showed potential of these technologies. However, there were few unanswered questions regarding uniform germination, appropriate altitude for seeding, and many factors which can affect seed placement. A collaborative project of Dr. Singh (Weed Scientist) and Dr. Reiter (Soil Scientist) at Eastern Shore AREC, attempted to provide more information on drone-based cover crop seeding, especially while using same drone for spray and seeding operations. The project will evaluate seeding rates, swath, altitude, germination and cover crop health. Results of these studies will be showcased during the field day in Summer 2024. The pictures show the team standardizing and optimizing the seeding rates using LeadingEdge Precision Vision drone system.

Use of Ground Robots for Weed Management

Dr. Vijay Singh, Assistant Professor & Extension Specialist, Weed Science

The use of robotics for weed control in conventional systems is a topic of worldwide research interest. However, robots differ substantially in different cropping systems and based on targeted pest. Weed Science team at Eastern Shore AREC is developing a versatile ground robotic system that can be used for weeds, insect and disease management including sensing and recognition capability. To begin with, team has started working on Amiga-ng platform (Farm-ng) which is an all-electric micro-tractor that is easy to adapt to any farm’s cropping systems.

The team will customize the platform and install smart sprayer which will use in-house developed algorithms and weed imagery digital datasets for weed identification purposes. This will reduce dependency on commercial programs and subscriptions, which will further reduce the operating cost.
Our previous “What’s That Bug” was a Harlequin bug. Harlequin bugs are in the same family as stink bugs. Unlike stink bugs that feed on a variety of host plants, harlequin bugs are monophagous and feed only on cole crops and brassicas. They lay black and white egg cylindrical egg masses on the underside of leaves. Nymphs are also black and red in appearance. Nymphs and adults feed on the leaves inserting their stylet into the tissue and removing fluids. The damage appears as white halo marks or blotches on the leaves and, if heavy enough, can lead to necrosis of the leaves, plant wilting and death.
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