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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Virginia Spirits Celebrates Commonwealth's Farmers at Farm Aid 2026

RICHMOND, Va. (Sept. 24, 2026) – As a sponsor of Farm Aid 2026 at Veterans United Home Loans Amphitheater in Virginia Beach, the Virginia Spirits Board celebrates the farmers who play an essential role in Virginia's distilled spirits industry and showcases the connection between agriculture and the Commonwealth's distilleries.

Virginia Spirits will be highlighting both Virginia agriculture and the Virginia Heritage Grain Project, which focuses on how spirits begin at the root with the agricultural products grown by Virginia farmers.

From Virginia farms to Virginia spirits

Virginia agriculture is a vital part of the spirits industry. From corn and rye to wheat and barley, Virginia farmers provide essential ingredients used by distillers across the commonwealth. The relationship between farmers and distillers does more than shape the products in the bottle; it also keeps more economic activity within Virginia communities.

Virginia farmers generated more than \$10.3 million in revenue in 2022 from local distilleries purchasing grain, wheat, barley, corn, rye and other harvests according to a study by Economic Forensics and Analytics, Inc., commissioned by the Virginia Spirits Board. An estimated 40 full-time agricultural jobs were supported by Virginia distillers and generated around \$1.27 million in agricultural wages.

That agricultural impact is a part of a broader footprint. Virginia's distillery industry generated more than \$1.1 billion in economic impact in 2022 and supported 3,081 jobs statewide, including jobs in grain farming and other industries throughout the spirits supply chain. It's estimated that Virginia distillers source more than 70% of their ingredients from Virginia farms.

"For more than 30 years, Farm Aid has focused on the American farmer and their importance to our way of life," said Jack Gorman, executive director of the Virginia Spirits Board Marketing Office. "We're proud to support the Farm Aid mission while focusing on the vital role Virginia farmers play in the commonwealth's spirits industry."

Preserving Virginia's agricultural heritage

The connection between agriculture and distilling is also on display through the Virginia Heritage Grain Project (VHGP), a Virginia Spirits Board-funded research initiative founded by Shelley Sackier of Reservoir Distillery. The project is transitioning into the programming of the Common Grain Alliance, a nonprofit supporting grain growers and grain artisans across the Mid-Atlantic. VHGP studies historic grain varieties to give craft distillers a viable, uncopiable alternative to commodity grain, while highlighting Virginia's roots as the birthplace of American spirits.

VHGP works in overlapping phases: seed procurement, planting and harvest, distillation and sensory assessment. Seed plot trials take place at Virginia Tech's research fields across Virginia's coastal, piedmont and mountain regions, while independent partner farms run matching trials of their own. The University of Kentucky's James B. Beam Institute and Reservoir Distillery conduct small-batch distillation trials, and a sensory panel evaluates the results. Field and flavor data determine which varieties advance, and because VHGP mitigates the fiscal risk, farmers and distillers are more inclined to participate.

"Commodity grain is a price, heritage grain is a place," Sackier said. "Every field has its own story, and soil is the first author of flavor – we're just the ones learning to read it." Since 2023, VHGP has planted more than 50 varieties of wheat, barley, rye and corn across Virginia Tech's research fields and on independent partner farms statewide. Small-batch and full-scale distillation has built a Distillate Library of more than two dozen heritage varieties, with new-make samples reserved for other distillers to evaluate by nose and palate. The project's first full-scale barrel distillations are now maturing in warehouses across the state, and formal culinary trials with bakers and chefs have begun, building demand for heritage grain beyond distillers and lowering the risk for farmers who commit acreage to a heritage variety.

The Revival Series pairs 10 farmer-distiller teams to grow, harvest, distill and bottle a heritage grain from seed to spirit. Eight partnerships are secured, and four have completed the full cycle through barreling.

"You can't bottle a place without the people who made it worth bottling," Sackier said. "That's why every Revival Series bottle is a farmer and a distiller, grain to glass, together."

More movement than study, VHGP is building a living archive of Virginia's flavor and a blueprint for what's next – a Virginia spirits industry built on partnership, not just production.

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About the Virginia Spirits Board

The Virginia legislature established the Virginia Spirits Board in 2020. The purpose of the Spirits Board is to allocate funds to projects that expand spirits distilling research, education, and promotion of the growing of grains and the production of spirits in the commonwealth. The

Virginia Spirits Board is one of 16 commodity boards within the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

About Common Grain Alliance

The Common Grain Alliance (CGA) is a nonprofit organization working to rebuild a resilient, equitable and regenerative grain economy across the Mid-Atlantic. By connecting farmers, millers, bakers, chefs and educators, CGA strengthens local supply chains, promotes regenerative agricultural practices and increases access to regionally grown grain. CGA blends education, storytelling and advocacy to make regional grain a viable, desirable and accessible choice for everyone.

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