

# Investing in Virginia's comeback

By Gerald F. Smith, Jr. and Michael A. Smith | Posted: Sunday, December 29, 2013 12:00 am

We are proud to say that we were born and raised in rural Virginia. The people and communities of the region have contributed to our family's company, Valley Proteins, ever since our grandfather opened it for business shortly after World War II. We believe in rural Virginia.

That is why we are strategically investing in a plan to help bring it back.

Our company is investing \$1 million in The Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative. Michael Smith, the vice president of Valley Proteins, is matching that with a personal donation of \$1 million. That lead gift of \$2 million will kick off a public-private partnership to elevate our region's educational pipeline.

As a family-owned business that employs 1,600 people, we depend on educated and well-trained employees to succeed. Those folks are not always easy to find – and unless something changes that will only get harder in rural Virginia.

Rural Virginia, which includes the Northern Neck, Eastern Shore, Southside and Southwest Virginia and sweeps up the valley to Winchester, has a population of 2.1 million people. If that were its own state, it would rank 50th in the nation in the percentage of people who hold a college degree; the rest of Virginia would rank No. 2. Likewise, one in four people in rural Virginia lack a high school diploma. That compares to one in 10 for the rest of Virginia.

That's bad news for employers like us, and it's bad news for rural Virginia's working families. Before this decade is over two out of three jobs available in Virginia will require more than a high school education. We need to elevate rural Virginia's education game to bolster the region's reputation as an attractive place to begin, expand and relocate a business. Should we not, the opportunities of the 21st century could pass us by for good.

The Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative is an answer to a longstanding challenge. The effort is a partnership among 14 Virginia community colleges, their foundations and their statewide foundation, The Virginia Foundation for Community College Education. The 10-year initiative will help middle-class families that mistakenly believe education past high school is out of reach; foster youth who are



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most at-risk; and adults who failed to finish high school but need money to pay for workforce training beyond a G.E.D.

The initiative focuses on two goals that would be game-changers for our future. The first is to cut in half the current percentage of rural Virginia's population without a high school diploma (or equivalent). The second is to double the number people in rural Virginia who hold a workforce credential or an associate's degree from 26 percent to 53 percent.

This project will begin a four-year, seven college pilot phase next year. Its leaders are seeking support from the General Assembly for a modest amount of funding included in Governor McDonnell's introduced budget. That public investment would be matched on a three-to-one basis with privately raised money, like the investment we are making.

The Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative will work by making part-time community college career coaches in rural Virginia high schools full-time, giving them the opportunity to help more students and families with college and career planning. Further, it will provide up to \$50,000 in scholarships, per college, to help G.E.D. recipients pursue postsecondary workforce training, earning the certifications that often lead to good-paying jobs and careers.

The tactics employed here have been proven effective at both Virginia's community colleges and by the Patrick County Education Foundation. We believe in them. That's why we are investing in them.

Valley Proteins has been in business for more than 60 years in rural Virginia. We have accomplished that by doing our homework and investing our money wisely. We have made this investment decision the same way, and we expect a solid return for it – a return, in this case, that will payoff for the future of the rural Virginia communities and people we believe in.

Gerald F. Smith, Jr., the company's president, and Michael A. Smith, the company's vice president, lead Winchester-based Valley Proteins. Contact them at 540-877-2590.