



Agricultural Environmental Management *Big Opportunities for Small Farms!*

By Barbara Silvestri

“With growing public interest in everything from food and water quality to carbon footprint and climate change, farmers have opportunities like never before to connect with customers,” said grass-fed beef farmer Sandy Gordon, owner of Gordon Farms in Albany County. “The more the public understands New York farming, the more they support us with their choices at the market.”

Over the last two years, this column has explored the ways New York’s Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) program assists farmers in addressing their natural resource concerns and opportunities. Now, we look at an aspect of AEM that is in growing demand: empowering farmers to develop positive public relations through their local media.

Here in New York, AEM is the framework to help farmers advance their conservation efforts, and to help the public connect how our farmers work to protect water quality, open space, wildlife habitat and natural resources. “The popularity of local, environmentally friendly farm products is on the rise,” said Gordon, “and AEM has helped me to recognize the number of conservation practices available that protect natural resources and increase the demand for my farm products.”

In order to maintain a thriving agricultural business farms must also be environmentally sound, and AEM provides a way for farmers to document their good stewardship and address potential environmental concerns before they become risks to their sustainability.

“With the public visiting our farm stand and nearby restaurant, it is imperative that we maintain the level of environmental stewardship that our customers expect,” said Lou Lego of Elderberry Pond in Cayuga County. “AEM has helped us to do just that, and our AEM ‘*Farmers Partnering to Protect Our Environment*’ sign at the roadside lets our customers know about it.”

The place to start is by conducting a free, confidential ***AEM Environmental Assessment*** to evaluate ways your farming practices are benefiting the environment and identify potential pollution risks. If you have concerns that need to be addressed, AEM professionals can provide technical assistance and coordinate local, state and federal resources to plan and implement conservation projects, which may even help boost your farm’s bottom line.

“Once a customer sees for themselves the number of AEM conservation practices installed on my farm, my products sell themselves,” said Gordon. “Local restaurants, food cooperatives and families seek out my product specifically because they know how much their choice helps to improve their local economy and natural resources.”

The next step is filling out AEM’s ***Agriculture & the Community Worksheet***, which will guide you in taking stock of the specific benefits your farm offers to the community. Benefits include value to the local tax base, contribution to the local economy, public recreation, drinking water

protection, natural resource preservation (of course!), and many more. The worksheet makes it easy by providing a checklist and a few simple calculations that can help tell your story. It also provides suggestions for tried-and-true techniques for improving your farm's relationship with your neighbors and community. Simple things like offering sample farm products or considering neighbors' outdoor plans when timing manure spreading have gone a long way in improving farms' neighbor relations.

Taking it a step further, AEM has provided an exciting communications program training over 550 farmers and AEM partners to become more proactive with their local newspaper, radio and television outlets to help get agriculture's message heard. Over the past three years, 27 ***AEM Working with the Media Workshops*** have been held across the state, sponsored by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, the American Dairy Association and Dairy Council and New York Farm Bureau. The training team of media professionals focus on the needs of New York farms of all types and sizes. Topics include developing key messages, putting together a press release, practicing interview techniques and managing the message through a crisis situation. Instead of dreading a phone call from an unknown reporter, farmers are encouraged to reach out to their local reporters and develop a relationship that includes conveying the benefits their farm provides to consumers, the environment and the local economy.

More than 90 percent of the participants have never worked with the media before. Some have used the skills they gained to more effectively communicate at town meetings, with elected officials or their neighbors. Others have also generated newspaper articles, television news spots and radio interviews about their farms, products and environmental stewardship. Several participants have established themselves or their agency as the 'go to' for the local press on agricultural issues. When called by a reporter, they have all learned how to effectively retain control of the message, either by handling it themselves or passing it to a partner who can. Benefits reported by participants include feeling more comfortable talking to a reporter, neighbors gaining a better understanding of farming practices and local legislators becoming more interested and responsive to their issues.

"Having a communications and conservation component in a farm's business plan are key ingredients to successful farming today," concluded Gordon.

To get started by documenting your stewardship through AEM, call your county Soil and Water Conservation District to schedule a free, confidential AEM Risk Assessment for your farm, including the *Agriculture & the Community Worksheet*!

To learn more about AEM, view the Worksheets, including the *Agriculture & the Community Worksheet*, or to locate your Conservation District office, visit: www.nys-soilandwater.org. For information about AEM communications workshops email barb.silvestri@agmkt.state.ny.us.