



Agricultural Environmental Management ***It's Good Business!***

By Barbara Silvestri

For many farmers, environmental stewardship is viewed not just as the 'right thing to do,' but increasingly as an important strategic asset for their businesses. Farmers know that in order for their businesses to remain strong, they need to be vigilant about protecting the environment. New

York's Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) program provides the tools to help accomplish both.

"In today's economy, we have to use all the resources available to remain viable," said John Kriese of Spring Pond Farm in Yates County. "The AEM Program has certainly helped me to continue my commitment to conservation and benefit my bottom line. Through analyzing my soils and my farming operation the quality of cattle that we now produce has greatly increased because of the AEM practices that we have put into effect."

A Voluntary Program

AEM is a voluntary, incentive-based program that assists farmers in their environmental stewardship efforts and protects the quality of their farms' natural resources, which are the foundation of their long-term economic viability. The AEM program coordinates agricultural and environmental conservation agencies and programs, as well as private sector consultants, to provide a one-stop resource for services. All agricultural counties in New York State are conducting AEM programs, and participation has grown to include nearly 10,000 farms.

Farmers work with a team of local AEM resource professionals to develop and implement comprehensive, site-specific farm plans using a five-tiered approach:

- Tier 1:** Inventory current activities, future plans and potential environmental concerns.
- Tier 2:** Document current land stewardship; assess and prioritize areas of concern.
- Tier 3:** Develop a conservation plan addressing concerns and opportunities tailored to farm goals.
- Tier 4:** Implement the plan utilizing available financial, educational and technical assistance.
- Tier 5:** Conduct evaluations to ensure the protection of farm viability and the environment.

The first step to take part in AEM is to contact your County Soil and Water Conservation District and complete the Tier 1 Questionnaire and the Tier 2 Risk Assessment, which consists

An AEM Risk Assessment can help you:

- Document your environmental practices and the benefits your farm provides to your community.
- Assess vulnerable areas of the farm that may present environmental risk.
- Identify practices at risk for regulatory action or neighbor complaints to prevent hassles and fines.
- Determine if your water supply or neighboring wells are at risk for contamination.
- Qualify for state and federal cost-share grants to address high risk issues.
- Acquire information for long-term business planning and better positioning in the marketplace.
- Consider conservation practices that could save you money when implemented.
- Earn "green" payments or participate in farmland protection programs.

of a set of worksheets appropriate to your farm operation. This is an efficient way to take a comprehensive look at potential environmental impacts and identify the resources available to address them. It will document what you are doing to protect the environment and prioritize areas for improvement.

AEM addresses more than just nutrient management. The risk assessment covers farmstead water supplies, pasture management, pesticide use, and many other farm practices. There are also worksheets specific to equine operations, greenhouses, and vineyards. The risk assessment can even provide resources to build and maintain positive relationships with neighbors.

An environmentally friendly farm conservation plan can maximize profits by enhancing soil quality, improving herd health, and reducing unnecessary applications of fertilizers and pesticides. AEM helps manage pollutants such as manure and fertilizer nutrients, handle barnyard runoff and process wastewater, conserve soil, prevent sedimentation, and protect drinking water.

Community Benefits

AEM practices on the farm also provide economic and environmental benefits to the community. When coupled with effective conservation practices, well managed farms are the preferred land use to improve water quality and protect valuable natural resources, which ultimately improves the lives of all New Yorkers.

Farms are important stewards of New York's natural resources, and the AEM program supports farms of all types and sizes in their efforts to be both environmentally sound and economically viable. In this time of environmental awareness, farm-neighbor tensions, and high production costs, AEM's technical and financial resources are particularly valuable to help farmers maintain their commitment to conservation.

"It's a win-win program!" said Kriese. "Our Yates County Soil and Water Conservation District AEM Coordinator, Tom Eskildsen, provided the options and the education we needed to make improvements on the farm that benefited our business, our neighbors and the environment."

If you would like to schedule a free, confidential AEM Risk Assessment for your farm, contact your County Soil and Water Conservation District. To learn more about AEM or to locate your Conservation District office, visit www.nys-soilandwater.org.

Watch for future articles on how AEM can help you farm cleaner and greener!