

Conservation Corner for Nov. 10, 2015

The Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program

Reducing Farming's Risk to the Environment

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How can farmers reduce the risks to the environment on their farms? What are the risks? How are they measured? Those are really good questions that are answered by a program offered through local Conservation Districts. The program has a mouthful of a name: Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program, or MAEAP for short.

This free program is brought to the farm through a technician. The local technician is Jodi Venema DeHate. She covers Wexford, Missaukee, Kalkaska, and Crawford counties. The program is voluntary, and Jodi takes the time to meet one-on-one with farmers that want to know about the environmental risks on their farm. You read that right – voluntary. Farmers are wonderful stewards of their land and they want to know some of the best ways to continue being good stewards.

Jodi meets farmers out at their farms, and walks around the farm with them while having a conversation about the farm operation. There are a set of booklets that contain questions that help discover where a farm can do a better job of reducing or eliminating risks to the environment. The three main booklets encompass different aspects of farming: Farmstead, Cropping, and Livestock. The Farmstead booklet talks a lot about the buildings and physical aspects of the farm such as fuel storage, pesticide storage, fertilizer storage and manure storage. The Cropping booklet goes over soil sampling, fertilizer usage, pesticide usage, cover crops, irrigation usage and manure usage. The Livestock booklet talks about things that relate to animals such as manure, feed storage, water usage on a farm and dead animal management. The questions are not just random questions. They come from the Michigan “Right to Farm” law. The booklets translate that law into useable formats that describe “best management practices.” Farmers can use these booklets as guidelines to help them determine if they are following “best management practices.” To be sure that the information is current, the booklets are updated annually.

At the end of the meeting, the farmer is left with a list of items that need to be addressed if the farm wants to complete the process to become verified as an environmentally-friendly farm. Jodi will help the farmers work with the USDA-Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) to access NRCS programs that can provide further technical and financial assistance. Farmers can also find assistance through MSU Extension educators such as Jerry Lindquist, Erin Lizotte, Jill O'Donnell, and Kathy Lee. They are experts in their field of study and help a lot of farms out with that expertise. The farmer and Jodi stay in contact and keep working on the farm's goals. The process of becoming a verified farm can happen in as quickly as a couple of weeks or as long as several years. It all depends on what risks are identified and what needs to be done to rectify those risks.

Once a farm has addressed all of its risks, the farm is then ready for verification. The verification involves another conversation with the farmer and a third-party verifier regarding the farm operation. Once that is complete the farm receives a free sign to display on their farm. So if you see signs like in the pictures, you now know what they mean.

This program sounds pretty awesome, but why should a non-farmer be excited about it? Remember this program was designed to help the environment. Here are some quick facts on how the environment has been helped through MAEAP:

1. Over 730,000 acres receiving pesticides have approved pest management plans. This means that the farms using pesticides are doing so responsibly and following the laws regarding pesticide usage.
2. 13,000 acres of filter strips have been installed. Filter strips are an NRCS practice that reduces the amount of soil erosion from fields being washed into lakes and streams.
3. Almost 2,300 gullies have been stabilized, improving water quality.
4. The erosion reducing aspects of MAEAP verification have kept almost 347,000 tons of agricultural soil where it belongs: in farm fields... EACH YEAR! That's 30,900 – 10 yard dump trucks of soil not reaching streams and lakes – every year.
5. Over half a million acres in the state have been verified confirming that manure is being applied responsibly and in accordance with the Right to Farm law.
6. Phosphorus is a major component of fertilizer that is applied to cropland. Through MAEAP there has been a 600,000 pound annual reduction in the application of this nutrient. Phosphorus is one of the main culprits in the Western Lake Erie algae blooms. There are some exciting technologies becoming available to farmers to recover and hold more of the phosphorus they apply.

The Wexford Conservation District provides technical assistance and education to area residents related to bogs as well as other natural resources – our soils, water, forests, plants, and wildlife – so that they can be wise stewards of these, their resources. Jodi works in conjunction with the Wexford Conservation District, and you can contact her by calling (231) 839-7193, emailing her at jodi.dehate@macd.org or by stopping by the Missaukee C.D. office at 6180 Sanborn Rd. in Lake City. More information about MAEAP can be found at MAEAP.org



Quartz Farm in Wexford County. Cali, Beth, Ray, and Dylan are holding up their MAEAP signs.



Jeanne Suggate, owner of Maple Leaf Farm in Missaukee County. Her farm earned the MAEAP verifications for Farmstead, Cropping, and Livestock.



Ron and Lorry Klinger, owners of Alpha Cone Hop Farm in Wexford County. The farm has earned MAEAP verifications in Farmstead, Cropping, and Livestock.