

Conservation Corner – March 15, 2016

Generations of Conservation

Safe storage of fuel is a key conservation practice

By Jeff Fewless

Wexford & Missaukee Conservation Districts

A leaking fuel tank or a fuel spill can very quickly lead to a situation where there is concern about contamination of ground water as well as lakes and streams. Farmers in our area are aware of this, and many of them are addressing the issue of safe storage and management of petroleum products so that they can be part of the answer to keeping our farms, our land, and our water healthy for years to come.

The Westmaas Farm in Missaukee County is a great example of a local family farm being proactive and taking measures to be sure that their fuel is stored and managed safely. Since 1959, the Westmaas' have been farming much of the same land, and using the same farmstead. Their farm provides vegetables to the Cadillac and Traverse City farmers markets, sugar beets to local farm stores, and hay to local livestock owners. The Westmaas family realized that in addition to good growing conditions, environmental stewardship is also needed to keep a farm going for generations. To that end, Larry Westmaas and son Brandon recently constructed a certified "On-Farm Secondary Fuel Containment System" for their fuels at the farmstead where Larry's father Ken currently lives.

An effective fuel containment system is one that will catch any fuel that is accidentally spilled or leaked and allow for safe, effective, and timely cleanup. It often includes venting, signs, a concrete pad, and lockable pumps amongst other things. One key provision is that there be an impermeable barrier that can contain a spill as large as 100% of the capacity of the fuel tank. This can be in the form of a double walled tank, or by having the tank installed on a concrete pad with a curb. The USDA-NRCS can provide both technical assistance and cost-share funds to assist a farmer in designing and installing fuel containment systems. In addition, they have partnered with the Michigan Department of Agriculture to jointly fund the Conservation Technology Assistance Initiative (CTAI) program. This program provides additional staff that can assist with project design and construction inspections. Employed by local Conservation Districts, CTAI technicians are frequently very familiar with local farms and their operations, and therefore can "hit the ground running" in providing technical assistance.

Often the first step in working on a fuel containment system is to answer a series of questions in order to determine the risk that is currently present. Are the tanks and pipes being used in the way for which they were designed? Is the fill opening separate from the vent opening? How are the pipes and tanks being monitored for leaks? What type of surface are they currently mounted on? Conservation District employees can work with farmers on these questions, and keep their answers confidential, and can also assist them with implementing practices to address any risks that are found.

We tip our hats to the efforts of the Westmaas family and to other farmers who care enough about the environment to safely store and manage their fuels. They are helping to keep Northern Michigan a wonderful place to live and work for all of us.

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Seen here is a Secondary Fuel Containment Facility in Missaukee County that was cost-shared through a special pool of funds set aside for farmers who voluntarily undertake a risk assessment of their farm. Safety measures included are a bumper posts prevent an accidental collision, and double walled tanks in case the inner tank should start to leak.



Brandon (Son), Josiah (Grandson), Larry (Father) & Ken (Grandfather) Westmaas are four generations on the Westmaas farm. They are standing next to their newly installed On-Farm Secondary Fuel Containment Facility.