

AEM Producers Updated on Programs, Receive Awards

--original article by Glenn Graves, Walton Reporter, March 18, 2009

WALTON – Farmers in the Susquehanna River Watershed and those who farm along the tail waters of the east and west branches of the Delaware River, below the Pepacton and Cannonsville reservoirs, attended a meeting in Walton last week to learn about a program developed by the Delaware County Soil and Water Conservation District (DCSWCD) and the financial, agricultural and environmental advantages it may hold for them. Others, already participating in the program, were presented awards for successfully implementing farm specific strategies to help maintain or improve water quality.

The DCSWCD has been holding these annual meetings for the past several years to address the need to reduce the amount of nutrients and sediment that are entering the Susquehanna and its tributaries, which has contributed to the Chesapeake Bay being labeled an “impaired water” by the United States Environmental Protection Agency. The meetings, which were formerly held in Oneonta, had been so well attended that this year’s meeting was moved to a larger facility, the Walton Fire Hall, and farmers from the Delaware tail waters were invited.



Don Ritz, at left, of Ritz Farms in Franklin, accepts a congratulatory handshake and an AEM program sign from New York State Soil and Water Conservation Committee Executive Director Michael Latham during an AEM producer meeting in Walton.

Rick Weidenbach, executive director of the DCSWCD, presented an overview of the county AEM program, which is one of 52 AEM programs in the state, each headed by a county soil and water conservation district and each with a different regional purpose and plan, although water quality is the major concern of all.

The AEM program was initiated by the New York State Soil and Water Conservation Committee five years ago, and funding for local projects is available from many federal and state sources, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Fund, The Farm Service Agency's Conservation Reserve and Conservation Reserve Enhancement programs (CRP and CREP) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), depending on the nature of the water quality initiatives.

Weidenbach welcomed the farmers, who included dairymen, meat producers and vegetable growers, and told them that despite the economic challenges they have been facing for decades, they have taken the lead in protecting the environment.

"Everybody is now talking about hard times and you guys have been struggling through hard times for years," Weidenbach said, "You're probably saying to yourselves, 'There, now everybody else knows what we've been through.' And through all the hardships, you guys are doing so much more for the environment than the guy living in the house up the street and we need to do a better job of getting that word out."

Michael Latham, the newly-appointed executive director of the state Soil and Water Conservation Committee, who also attended the event, praised the environmental stewardship of the farmers as well. "Long before carbon footprinting became buzzwords," he said, "our farmers were recycling and caring for the environment."

Weidenbach explained the core concepts of the AEM program, which are voluntary and incentive-based, as well as locally led and coordinated. He said individual programs are based on a particular watershed's needs and customized farm by farm. The financial terms are confidential, Weidenbach added.

He said the DCSWCD delivers the funding for the AEM program in the Susquehanna watershed and in the tail waters region. "So, 25 percent of the county is getting 100 percent of the resources," Weidenbach stated, adding that funding for programs in the New York City Watershed is managed by the Watershed Agricultural Council.

Weidenbach explained that the AEM program has five tiers for each producer, regardless of what each individual farm may need.

Tier I is the filing of an inventory questionnaire, which provides basic farm information and asks the farmer's motivation for joining the program. Tier 2 involves working with DCSWCD staff to develop an assessment worksheet. Tier 3 is the planning stage. Tier 4 is implementation of the plan, and Tier 5 is an evaluation of a farm project's success.

Eight farms were cited for having completed Tier 3 planning for their individual AEM projects:

- Bob Avery and his sister, Eugenia, have enrolled 2.3 acres in the CREP program, to convert 2.3 acres of pasture to a riparian forest buffer along the Ouleout Creek.
- Michael Ross has completed a Tier 3 riparian forest buffer and rotational grazing plan at his North Franklin farm. He has enrolled four acres in CREP and will develop a paddock system for the remaining 30 acres of pasture for grazing his cowherd.
- Ray Lewis has completed a Tier 3 riparian forest buffer plan and will enroll eight acres in CREP. The 150-foot stretch along Carrs Creek will have some streambank stabilization installed to protect the buffer.
- Robert Kathmann has completed a Tier 3 riparian forest buffer plan and will enroll 7.8 acres in CREP. Additional planning included protecting heavy-use areas and other exclusion measures to prevent barnyard run-off from entering the stream at his organic farm in Meredith.
- Pete and Shannon Christensen have completed a comprehensive nutrient management plan for their farm in Davenport and are working through the precision feed management process for their 65-cow dairy.
- Donald and Donny Smith of Franklin have completed a comprehensive nutrient management plan for their farm and are also working through the precision feed management process for their 116-cow dairy.
- Mark and Richard Kenyon of Meredith have developed a nutrient management plan and are going through the precision feed process for their 325-cow dairy farm.
- Harold Scott has completed his nutrient management plan and is going through the precision feed process for his 130-cow dairy in Masonville.

Five farms were recognized for having gotten through the fourth tier:

- Ritz Farms in Franklin completed an 85-acre CREP riparian forest buffer along the Ouleout during the past year.
- The Virgil Briggs Estate in Deposit will have its first CRP project, involving 15.5 acres, completed this spring, which will include the installation of cattle crossings and tree plantings. Two riparian forest buffers, totaling 27.75 acres are still in the planning stages, as is a rotational grazing system on 160 acres of pasture and hay land.

- Danny and Naomi Buel of Franklin will complete their 9.75 acres of riparian forest buffer this summer. A spring has been developed and 8,000 feet of high tensile fence have been installed and tree and shrub plantings and a stream crossing, with 75 feet of bank stabilization will complete the project this year.
- Frank DeBoer of Franklin will complete the two-acre CREP riparian forest buffer with tree and shrub plantings and the implementation of a well for livestock watering. His farm plan will be complete after construction of a composting facility, which is currently being designed.
- Shane Stalter will complete his second CREP riparian forest buffer project of 10.5 acres at his Franklin heifer facility this summer.

Following the awards presentations, Karen Clifford, special programs technician at DCSWCD, explained the benefits and funding opportunities for riparian buffers. She said that there is funding for up to 90 percent of each project's costs and since 2005, DCSWCD has brought \$1.4 million for "buffers and related projects" to Delaware County, and all has been spent for projects outside the New York City Watershed.

Paul Cerosaletti, dairy and field crops educator at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Delaware County, gave an overview of precision feed management and announced that precision feed management farms average 1,400 more pounds of milk per cow, per year. He also discussed the county Cooperative Extension's grass pellet project, which is being piloted at several municipal buildings in Delaware County. He explained which grasses had optimum burning qualities and said there is a European prototype of a grass pellet furnace that can generate electricity as well as heat.

Cerosaletti is also involved in a no-till planting program and said he hopes to have 35 farms enlisted in 2009. He said 28 farms, with 718 acres, participated in the practice in 2008.

Challey Comer and Leslie Deysenroth of the Watershed Agricultural Council's Pure Catskills program, which Markets and promotes watershed agricultural products, invited the farmers on the Susquehanna and in the tail waters to join the program. She said that Pure Catskills can offer up to \$5,000 to organizations to bring local food to their events, such as church suppers and the annual Cauliflower Festival in Margaretville.
