

SWCD Warns Susquehanna Basin Farmers that New Regulations Could Be Imposed in Coming Year

By Glenn Graves

WALTON - The Delaware County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) holds an annual meeting for Susquehanna River Basin farmers where those enrolled in Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) programs, to reduce the flow of nutrients and sediment into the river and its tributaries, are recognized and all are kept up to date on the progress of the federal Chesapeake Bay Program, which is aiming to lessen the pollutants that enter the Chesapeake Basin, of which the Susquehanna is a large part.

Last Thursday, the group met at the Walton Fire Hall and SWCD Executive director Rick Weidenbach said the Chesapeake Program deadline to voluntarily reduce the nutrients and sediments to manageable levels is 2010 and it's probable new regulations will be enforced to reduce them further.

Weidenbach said that 22 percent of Delaware County is in the Chesapeake Bay watershed and that 16 other New York counties are also entirely or partially in the watershed. He said the SWCD and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Delaware County have been working together "to keep the monsters at bay," but more restrictive total maximum daily loads (TMDLs) of the nutrients, phosphorus and nitrogen, and sediment will be imposed.

"The states were given the responsibility to set the TMDLs and New York state met its cap loads," Weidenbach said. "However, now we have to do a proportionate cut (with the other watershed states), which isn't fair. The good news is, OEC (New York State Department of Environmental Conservation) has assured us they're going to fight this.

"Other states should do more. They're polluting more," Weidenbach pointed to the large chicken farming operations in Maryland and Pennsylvania as major pollution contributors.

Weidenbach said Delaware County's farmers aren't making a large contribution to the amount of nutrients heading across the Pennsylvania border with the Susquehanna flow. He said 59 percent of the nitrogen entering the liver originates on farms. "That's not from your farms, though," he said. "You're not those large flat farms in Tioga County which apply all that fertilizer."

Weidenbach said agriculture's contribution to the amount of nutrients continues to drop. "One reason is that agriculture is declining," he said. "The other is that you guys are doing a much better job."

He said that through implementation of the AEM program, buffers around water sources, managed stream crossings for livestock, improved stormwater management practices and other endeavors are reducing the amount of pollution originating from non-point sources, such as farms.

Weidenbach said that point sources, such as wastewater treatment plants, will be forced by the federal government "to dial down loads."

He said he is fearful that there won't be enough federal funding to help communities reduce those TMDLs from point sources. "If the Chesapeake is a national treasure, why should the locals pay for it?" he asked.

Weidenbach said Delaware County has been aggressive in reducing its contributions to the pollution in the Chesapeake, while there is funding, though minimal, available for programs such as AEM, which pays farmers to implement the environmental improvement practices. "You've got to do it before it's mandated," he said. "Because, once it's mandated, you have to pay for it."

Weidenbach said the timeline for finding out what new regulations the watershed can expect will begin on June 1, when the state has to submit draft watershed implementation plans to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). He said that after receiving the EPA's comments, the state must submit a

revised plan by Aug. 1.

From Aug. 15-Oct. 15, EPA will have a public comment and review period, and after receiving those comments, the states will submit final implementation plans on Nov. 1. On Dec. 31, the EPA will publish the TMDLs it will require of each state and region, "Unless someone challenges this," Weidenbach added.

After the farmers were provided lunch, different AEM program component practices were discussed, including stream buffering, rotational grazing and no-till farming. New opportunities for funding, including raising grains and grasses for biomass energy use, were explained.

Challey Comer, the Farm to Market Manager at the Watershed Agricultural Council, said that her agency which was established to administer programs in the Delaware River watershed, is making grants of up to \$5,000 available to all farmers in the region, for product development, marketing and event development. She said the competitive grants are available for Pure Catskills members and those with new and varied programs and products.

Comer said the Watershed Agricultural Council will introduce a new program this year, the Catskills Landlink, that will connect working farmers with those possessing inactive farmland.

During the awards presentation, Norm and Arlene Schubert, John Bishop, Pete and Shannon Christensen, Catherina Kessler and Robert Eiler were all recognized for completing the farm planning process and enrollment process. Rogel Hamilton of Delhio Falm, James Keator of Keator Farm, Andy Kiraly, Ray Lewis, Allen Freedman of Charlotte Valley Farm and Warrcn Schuman of Wind Swept Farm, were all presented certificates and signs for having begun implementation of their AEM program projects.

Walton Reporter
March 31, 2010

