

NATURAL RESOURCE CONSERVATION



As stewards of the land, farmers must protect the quality of our environment and conserve the natural resources that sustain it by implementing conservation practices that improve water quality, conserve water and energy, prevent soil erosion and reduce the use of nutrients and pesticides.

Overview

Soil. Water. Energy. Little could grow without them.

That is why protecting and conserving these and other natural resources should be a priority of all who live and work in New Jersey, including farmers. This is not a new idea for New Jersey or the nation. Since 1935, when the Soil Conservation Act was passed – during the worst of the Dust Bowl – this country has recognized the importance of the land and its relation to the overall well being of the nation.

Various state and federal programs have been initiated to protect natural resources. The programs have evolved over the years to take advantage of advances in agricultural practices.

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture helps to protect and conserve the state's soil, water and related natural resources through the stewardship efforts of its natural resource conservation program. This program offers technical, financial and regulatory assistance and provides educational outreach to landowners throughout the state.

In addition to the Department's program, a variety of other federal and state programs exist to provide technical and financial assistance to landowners for the conservation, protection and improvement of soil, water, air, and related resources.

A number of programs provide assistance to eligible landowners to address wetlands, woodlands, and wildlife habitat. A few of the voluntary programs even provide payments to producers who have historically practiced good stewardship on their land and provide incentives to those who want to do more.

The 2002 Farm Bill placed a greater emphasis on the implementation of new and expanded conservation programs that help protect our soil resources and improve water quality. The Department, through the State Soil Conservation Committee, is planning for the strategic implementation of these programs as well as state conservation programs. The Committee, in the fall of 2003, began coordinating an initiative for Soil Conservation Districts to perform a natural resource assessment to determine conservation needs and priorities at the local level. This effort will help to identify the appropriate conservation programs to implement and the technical and financial assistance needed in each district area.

The 2002 Farm Bill also provides funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which provides technical, financial and educational assistance to farmers for conservation practices that address natural resource concerns. However, based on past experience, it is unlikely this federal funding will provide the much-needed technical and engineering assistance for conservation planning and design.

Qualified Practices and Projects Under The Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)

- Integrated crop management
- Grazing land management
- Well sealing
- Erosion control systems
- Agri-chemical handling facilities
- Vegetative filter strips and riparian buffers
- Animal waste management facilities
- Irrigation systems

In 1999, the New Jersey Department of Agriculture established three regional Agricultural Conservation Service Centers and provided annual funding for technical and engineering assistance in order to reduce backlogs and meet new application demands. The Department is currently working in conjunction with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to continue to provide and enhance these service centers and increase the necessary technical assistance to farmers.

Outside of the Farm Bill programs, the Department and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection jointly developed a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) proposal that Governor McGreevey submitted to the United States Department of Agriculture. New Jersey's program seeks to enroll 30,000 acres of agricultural lands into conservation practices that will improve the quality of runoff from these lands. This program encourages farm owners to voluntarily implement conservation practices on their land by offering financial incentives for participation. The program provides a 10-year enrollment period and targets the installation of riparian buffers, filter strips, contour buffer strips and grass waterways. Farmers will be able to enroll their land in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program by installing conservation practices under 10-15 year rental agreements and/or permanent easement contracts.

Of the 2.1 million acres of forested land in New Jersey, 1.3 million are privately owned, 326,000 are owned by the state and 73,000 are

Did you know that New Jersey farmers provide more than 70,000 families with Christmas trees each year?

federally owned. The remainder are owned by other public entities. Combined, forested land and productive farmland account for more than 60 percent of New Jersey's land base. Forestlands are often components of larger traditional agricultural operations, but are also considered to be a form of agriculture on their own. Like other forms of agriculture, woodlands require management strategies to continue to provide income to the landowner while ensuring the protection and preservation of other vital resources, including clean surface water, adequate groundwater supplies, and soil retention.

Recent droughts have sensitized farmers to the need for adequate farm water supplies, efficient water conservation irrigation systems and an irrigation water management regimen that reduces unnecessary water use. Although agriculture accounts for a small portion of the state's total water use, the availability of an adequate and sustainable water supply for agricultural purposes is becoming more problematic. Competing user demands and limitations in critical water supply areas only exacerbate this problem. The Department is working with Rutgers Cooperative Extension, the Natural Resources Conservation Services, the United States Geological Survey, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and the farm community to assess the water needs of agriculture and to assist in the development of essential rules, policies and guidelines to ensure an adequate water supply to meet the current and future needs of the agricultural industry.

Finally, as part of a national Clean Water Action Plan, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have proposed a unified national strategy for addressing water quality concerns on animal farm operations. At the request of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection prepared a statewide strategy outlining how Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) and Animal Feeding Operations (AFOs) will be managed and/or regulated. The strategy, under existing legislative authority and through cooperative agreements, calls for the state Department of Environmental Protection to administer the required permits for CAFOs and the New Jersey Department of Agriculture to administer the appropriate measures for AFOs. A CAFO general permit is now available through the Department of Environmental Protection. The primary

requirement of the permit is the development and implementation of a comprehensive waste management plan. The Department of Agriculture is developing an animal waste program with criteria and standards for the proper disposal of animal wastes, including the waste generated from aquaculture. This program will emphasize the use of cost-effective voluntary measures and limit the need for permits, primarily through the implementation of farm conservation plans.

Objectives & Strategies

- Farmers should prepare and implement farm conservation plans to address total natural resource concerns, including those related to soil, water, air, and other natural resources.
 - Work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Soil Conservation Districts to ensure that an adequate technical assistance delivery system is in place to meet the anticipated demand for conservation cost-share funding under the 2002 Farm Bill and other federal and state conservation programs.
 - Re-examine the role of the Soil Conservation Districts to restore and expand their traditional duties with respect to natural resource conservation. Soil Conservation Districts can play key roles in planning, managing and monitoring the growing inventory of public open space, including publicly acquired farmland. They can also become more involved in storm water management, watershed planning, environmental restoration and sustainability. In addition to their statutory regulatory functions, Soil Conservation Districts can provide important technical assistance and engage in greater public outreach in these areas and in the development and implementation of healthy soil management strategies.
 - Provide outreach information to ensure farmers take full advantage of all federal and state conservation programs and to educate them about the benefits of having and implementing farm conservation plans and participating in agricultural conservation programs.

- Establish local working groups through New Jersey's Conservation Districts to perform natural resource assessments to determine conservation needs and priorities at the local level.
 - Develop a comprehensive animal waste program that provides for the proper disposal of animal wastes, including the waste generated from aquaculture, to guide the development of farm conservation plans for livestock operations.
 - Aggressively implement the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program in New Jersey to allow for the creation of riparian buffers and appropriate improvements to protect and improve water quality.
 - Work cooperatively with the Department of Environmental Protection and the Natural Resource Conservation Service to seek and establish incentives for farmers who implement forest management plans.
 - Explore and expand the use of beneficial insects and other biological controls to reduce the use of chemical pesticides.
- Ensure that agricultural water needs are adequately considered and met on a long-term and sustainable basis.
 - Work in conjunction with the Department of Environmental Protection to update New Jersey's Water Supply Master Plan in order to identify the water needs of farmers. Represent agricultural interests on the Water Supply Advisory Council, the Public Advisory Committee and its subcommittee to ensure water and agricultural needs are met not only for today's farmers, but to sustain future agricultural operations.
 - Encourage and work to accelerate the use of efficient water conservation technologies, such as drip irrigation. Identify and promote new and efficient methods to conduct water distribution on farms, including farm ponds and water reuse options.
 - Develop accurate data regarding agricultural water use by using GIS technology to maintain an agricultural water use database and track information on water use by location, types of systems and crops.

- Work with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection to streamline the water certification and registration process.
- Promote the use of innovative technologies, recycling, energy conservation and renewable energy systems on New Jersey's farms.
 - Examine the solid waste stream generated by the state's farming operations and determine the feasibility of expanding the Department's existing recycling program.
 - Inform the agricultural community about new and existing energy conservation and renewable energy programs by promoting the financial and environmental benefits of implementing these programs.
 - Promote the use of current technology systems utilizing precision agriculture to reduce inputs and increase productivity on farms.

Did you know that in 2002, New Jersey recycled nearly 26,000 pounds of plastic pesticide containers, nursery pots, flats and five gallon plastic buckets, and 472,000 pounds of nursery and greenhouse film?

To protect the state's natural resources is to also protect the state's agricultural industry. Few would argue about the importance of an abundant supply of clean water and clean soil to maintaining a viable agriculture. Preserving farms and planning for growth are key to maintaining the industry, but what kind of industry would there be without the natural resources to sustain it? Through the use of conservation practices and through policies and programs at the state, county and local levels, New Jersey can ensure that natural resources will remain available to sustain not only the state's agricultural industry, but all who live and work in the Garden State.