



# Section 319 Success Stories, Vol. III

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## Innovative State Programs

### New York's Agricultural Environmental Management Program:

### Incentive-based Program Helps Farmers Meet Tough Standards

The Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) Program has put New York State in the forefront of a national effort to help farmers identify and address agricultural nonpoint source pollution. New York's AEM Program is a statewide voluntary, incentive-based program that helps all farmers operate environmentally sound and economically viable businesses. The AEM Program provides cost-sharing and educational and technical assistance for developing and implementing agricultural plans. The plans enable farmers of operations of all sizes to remain good stewards of the land, maintain the economic viability of the farm operation, and comply

**Contact:**

Barbara Silvestri  
New York State Soil &  
Water Conservation  
Committee  
1 Winners Circle  
Albany, NY 12235  
518-457-3738  
[silvestrb@nysnet.net](mailto:silvestrb@nysnet.net)

with federal, state, and local regulations relating to water quality and other environmental concerns.

The AEM partnership of state, federal, and local agencies, conservation representatives, private sector businesses, and farmers has been recognized and bolstered by AEM legislation proposed by New York's governor and passed by the state's Senate and Assembly in June 2000. On August 24, 2000, the governor signed the AEM Bill into law, codifying the program to help New York's agricultural community in its stewardship of the state's soil and water resources.

The partnership operates at both the state and local levels. The New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets and the New York State Soil and Water Conservation Committee provide leadership at the state level, while Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) provide local leadership. The flexibility of the AEM Program allows the partners to address both statewide and specific local water quality needs. The local delivery of AEM, along with state funding support, has resulted in participation approaching 8000 farms statewide.

### **AEM funding**

The AEM Program is funded by a mix of section 319 money and grants from the state's 1996 Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act and the State Environmental Protection Fund. The ability of farmers to access funding through SWCDs has been a driving factor in farmers' acceptance of and participation in the AEM Program. The governor, with the assistance of the state's Soil and Water Conservation Committee, awarded about \$6.3 million in 2000 from the state's Environmental Protection Fund and Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act for planning and implementing best management practices (BMPs) to prevent or reduce nonpoint source pollution to water bodies. Through fiscal year 1998, a total of \$1,863,660 in section 319 money had been used to develop and promote the program in New York's agricultural community. In 2000 the total allocation from state funding sources stood at \$20.4 million, with annual funding showing a consistent trend upward.

### **New York's response to tougher standards**

AEM offers farmers a way to comply with stricter regulatory requirements, advance the state's water quality objectives, and meet business objectives on the farm at the same time. The concepts, partnerships, and materials that

constitute AEM grew from many sources, including watershed projects and the national Farm\*A\*Syst program.

The AEM program begins with the farmer's expressing an interest in the program. After that, there are five tiers to be completed. Under Tier I, a short questionnaire surveys the farmer's current activities and future plans and begins to identify potential environmental concerns. Tier II involves completing worksheets that document current environmental stewardship while identifying and prioritizing environmental concerns. Tier III involves the development of a conservation plan that is directly tailored toward the goals for the individual farm. This plan is mutually developed by the AEM Coordinator, the farmer, and several members of the cooperating agency staff. Under Tier IV, agricultural agencies and consultants provide the farmer with technical, educational, and financial assistance to implement BMPs on the farm, using Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) standards and guidance from professional engineers. The last tier includes ongoing evaluations to ensure that AEM helps protect both the environment and the viability of farm businesses.

AEM provides a mechanism for all sizes and types of farms to meet the requirements of various state and federal environmental laws and regulations within the unique limitations of each farm's resource base. For example, the AEM Program is helping farmers meet New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) permit requirements for concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). As a response to federal requirements, the state has developed a general permit for certain large livestock farms. As a result, more than 600 CAFOs have filed Notices of Intent to comply with the DEC permit requirements.

To meet an increasing workload, the AEM Steering Committee adopted a certification process in conjunction with NRCS to get qualified AEM planners into the field. Certification assures environmental regulators, producers, and the public of quality work in AEM. The program has now trained 104 persons from the public and private sectors in the development of comprehensive nutrient management plans (CNMPs). To date, seven planners have been certified, resulting in the completion of CNMPs for 33 farms.

### **Looking ahead**

Agriculture is a multibillion-dollar business in New York State, and the AEM Program works to keep all of the state's farms environmentally sound and economically viable. Every farm is valuable for what it contributes to the economy, the environment, and the beauty of New York State, and AEM is strengthening this legacy for the future. We all depend on clean drinking water and wholesome food for our existence. With sufficient support and assistance, through Agricultural Environmental Management, New York State's farm families will provide both of these.

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