



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

Saving a National Treasure

FACT SHEET

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LANCASTER COUNTY PLAIN SECT FARMERS AS CLEAN WATER STEWARDS



Dairy cows on improved barnyard with stormwater controls. Photo: USDA-NRCS.

Farm Bill Conservation Programs at Work on an Amish Farm

It didn't seem like a big deal to the Amish farmer. It was just a narrow tributary of a creek that flowed past the dairy barn, where the manure and water ran.

“We thought of the tiny stream as a drainage ditch, as a way of getting rid of material we did not want,” he shares.

“It ran downstream and out of our lives. We thought, ‘this stream is so small. There is really no need to worry about our actions.’”

And then his mind changed. The farmer, who prefers to remain anonymous, participated in a Farmers to the Bay program offered by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) twenty years ago. He joined a van load of other farmers who travelled down to the Bay and boarded a traditional oyster fishing sailboat called a “Skipjack” to see and learn how everything is connected.

“That’s when it hit home. Every farmer is concerned about how to make ends meet but until we actually saw the bigger picture with our eyes - the oyster beds, and all the people’s lives and livelihoods that are impacted from our nitrogen runoff - it was difficult to understand how we could possibly impact this huge, 200 mile-long bay so far from our Lancaster County farm.”

Since then, he adopted no-till cropping practices. More recently, he completely revamped his farm to be more environmentally sound. He installed a new manure storage facility on his property along with collection systems for barnyard waste and runoff, storm water, and milk house waste. For stream health, native trees and shrubs were planted, and stream banks were fenced. He also protected the soil on his cropland with a diversion, a grassed waterway, and winter cover crops. Representatives from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS), the Lancaster County Conservation District (LCCD), and CBF came to his farm over the years to discuss options for keeping nutrients from leaving the farm, and helped him make these changes.

USDA-NRCS Soil Conservation Technician, Wendy Coons, and LCCD Ag Conservation Advisor, Larry Zuschlag, visited the farm to look at the fields and farm buildings to evaluate sources of runoff and discuss possible solutions. Ashley Spotts, CBF’s Restoration Biologist in Lancaster County, worked with the farmer

CBF's Buffer Bonus Program

In 2009, CBF and a host of other groups launched a program to encourage Amish and Old Order Mennonite farmers to implement projects to reduce runoff from fields and barnyards while at the same time using the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to restore forested stream buffers. Since the inception of the program, more than forty Plain Sect farmers have used this Buffer Bonus option to achieve a level of conservation needed to restore the health of local streams, the Susquehanna River, and the Bay.

This is one in a series of articles about farmers in the Chesapeake Bay watershed who have implemented conservation practices to improve farm operations and water quality in nearby streams, demonstrating how agriculture has achieved half of the nutrient reductions necessary to clean up local streams and the Chesapeake Bay.

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to plant forested stream buffers at least 35 feet wide on each side and to install fencing to keep the cows out of the stream. All utilize funding from federal Farm Bill programs.

These changes are ultimately good business for the farmer. Storing manure saves the farmer time and enables him to spread it on his fields when most appropriate for the ground and environment. By controlling barnyard runoff, more manure can be saved and used as a resource, reducing the need for and cost of additional fertilizer. With no-till practices and a forested buffer along the stream, this farmer protects his precious soil from running off with the next big storm.

Under most conservation programs, farmers must pay for part of the cost of the improvements and are in turn personally invested in the changes they are making. The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), a Farm Bill program administered by USDA's Farm Service Agency, typically covers most of the cost to create the stream buffers: tree planting, fencing, alternative water source, and stream crossings for livestock. CREP also offers reimbursement for the land taken out of production and planted into trees.

As part of a targeted outreach program here in Lancaster County and in Chester County, CBF, USDA-NRCS, County Conservation Districts, and other partners helped over sixty Plain Sect farms establish healthy environmental practices with stream buffers and farm improvements.

Many in the Amish and Old Order Mennonite community (collectively called "Plain Sect") are apprehensive about working with outside agencies. They are concerned about losing control of their farms, their land, their lives, and their income. But this is not the reality of the assistance offered. This Amish farmer says it will take time for others to come to trust, to learn. He must be subtle, cautious, and careful, leading by example. That is how he hopes to win many more over.

"I know this frame of mind. That's how I too used to think. But of course, the water adds up. A small polluted creek leads into a larger river which leads into the Bay. It is all connected."

Anyone can drive by and see that his farm looks cleaner. His animals do not wallow in muddy manure and as a result, don't get as ill. Vet bills decreased, his cows live longer and produce more milk...a win-win situation for all.

As his son prepared to start a career in dairy farming at a property nearby, this farmer wanted the new operation to be environmentally friendly from the start. He and his son visited with Ms. Coons and other NRCS staff to discuss needed improvements which have since been installed. Beginning farmers, like his son, receive priority under some Farm Bill programs. Keeping young farmers on working farms in Lancaster County has been hard lately - development pressure and economic challenges have been pushing new farmers out of the county.



A newly built manure storage and a controlled animal walkway illustrate two practices that Farm Bill programs support. Photo: CBF

After that first boat trip twenty years ago, last year this farmer worked with CBF to help a new group of Plain Sect farmers experience the Bay on a fishing boat, launched from the organization's headquarters in Annapolis, MD. Before boarding the boat, the farmers saw how Lancaster County appears as a red zone on a shaded map showing water pollution contribution, and better understood how they add to the problem. There is a huge concentration of farms and animals and people in Lancaster County with a resulting high nutrient and sediment load to local waterways.

"Before I learned, I was ignorant of a lot of the facts," he explains. "But with this basic education and awareness, it is much easier to do the right thing. With the agencies' help, we can learn what the right thing is and get the necessary help and monetary assistance to make it happen."

But the tools available to farmers to help them make those changes are at risk if Congress does not pass a new Farm Bill. While the conservation programs in the Farm Bill represent a mere 5.7% of the overall funding package, they are critical to Pennsylvania farmers' efforts to improve their operations, both for the environment and their bottom line. The fate of local water quality here largely rests with the Farm Bill's renewal.

“There are hundreds of barns built over a hundred years ago, located extremely close to water sources,” explains Lamonte Garber, CBF's PA Agricultural Program Manager. “It is very expensive to bring these farms up to current environmental regulations with just a monthly milk check. Yet it is critical that the changes occur - for Lancaster County, the Susquehanna River, the Chesapeake Bay. Everyone is affected by it.”



BEFORE: CREP forested buffer under construction along a small stream on this farm. Photo: CBF



AFTER: Three years later, many of the trees are fully emerged from tree tubes. The herbicide strip along the trees increases tree survival. Photo: CBF

“Our people sometimes look on the polluted Bay problem as one caused by the outside world, but we must care and respect it,” this farmer says. “I saw an Amish manure spreader with a bumper sticker that said, ‘No farms, no food,’ but I believe we can have farms and food *and* save the environment. We don't have to spread manure on the field and have it run into the Bay.”

“It is important to keep our culture alive for future generations but I believe there is a way to do that while cleaning up our streams. “

“My father farmed this land, and his father and his father. We have a long lineage and a connection here. My passion for caring for the land comes from my desire to pass this land onto my children so it is possible for them to farm and build a life here. For it really isn't our farm, in the true sense of the word. We are just caretakers of the land. When you buy a farm, we don't buy the environment. Water is part of the Commonwealth, belonging to all people.”



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION
Saving a National Treasure

Founded in 1967, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) conservation organization dedicated to saving a national treasure—the Chesapeake Bay and its rivers and streams. Its motto, Save the Bay, defines the organization's mission and commitment. With headquarters in Annapolis, MD, offices in Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia, and 17 field centers, CBF works throughout the Chesapeake Bay's 64,000-square-mile watershed to build an informed citizenry, advocate pollution-reduction strategy, and enforce the law. CBF is supported by more than 200,000 active members and has a staff of 170 full-time employees. Approximately 80 percent of CBF's \$23.6 million annual budget is privately raised.