

Sustainable Farming 03-05-19

MAEAP a program that has benefits for all involved

Ever think about what sustainable farming really looks like? For most people it seems to evoke an image of a small, organic farm. That may not be wrong, but it's not the complete picture. The Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) works with farms of all sizes to ensure that they are reducing risk to the environment and are environmentally friendly and helping farms become more sustainable.

What's MAEAP?

The acronym doesn't mean much until you know what the program does, it's an innovative, voluntary programs that helps farms of all sizes and commodities prevent or minimize agricultural pollution risks. The program was developed by Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD), Michigan State University Extension, commodity groups, agribusiness, and groups like Michigan Farm Bureau.

MAEAP was developed to help farms that were being encroached by urban sprawl and more complaints and township laws were aimed at limiting agriculture when the farms had been there first. The Right to Farm Act had been in place since 1981 and gave the framework of how to proceed. The stakeholders wanted something that was based off of best management practices and something with a transparent verification system of checking on farms. So using a model from the National Pork Producers Council, MAEAP included farm visits, evaluations based on best management practice, a report to the farmer on what would need to be changed to be verified, and finally a third party verification system.

Okay, great but how does this really work? The process goes something like this: the farmer and technician make an appointment for the technician to come out, tour the farm, and ask a ton of questions that are related to best management practices. The books of questions, called Asysts stay with the farmer, and the technician makes an action plan or a to do list for the farmer to accomplish so the farm can be in full compliance with Right to Farm and receive its verification.

Once a farm has completed those items, then a third party verification takes place. Then the farm is MAEAP verified and receives a very nice sign.

Sounds easy, right? Not so fast. When a farmer calls to ask to know how much the verification will cost there isn't a good answer. There are 2 things each farm has to do for sure - soil sample and get a well water test. Other than that, not until the technician tours the farm will the farm knows what needs to be done.

Some pretty normal things a technician sees are a fuel tank too close to a well, or lack of good records in terms of fertilizer, manure, or pesticide usage, or poor storage for manure, fertilizers, or pesticides.

Benefits to the farmer

The legal protections that is offered by the Right to Farm Act are very real and very helpful. Every farm is covered under Right to Farm, but may not be protected if they aren't following those best management practices. MAEAP walks the farm through that in those Asyst books. This protection is typically the number one sell of the program. Laws limiting agriculture in an area that is typically agriculture will be challenged by the Right to Farm Act.

Keeping that in mind, many farmers have asked if the MAEAP program will ever be mandatory. As of right now, no. MDARD does NOT want to change the voluntary involvement that seems to have better farmer buy in and implementation than making it mandatory would.

The sign and usage of the MAEAP label are another reason many growers want to be involved. However, many farms, don't want to put up the sign but just want the satisfaction of completing and continually working toward more sustainability with this program.

Another popular reason farms work with a MAEAP technician is to help their ranking with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) for their cost share program. NRCS and MAEAP have very similar goals. MAEAP will look at the whole farm and may discover some other things that need to be fixed that NRCS can help pay for.

Benefits to non-farmers

1. The sign shows that farms are doing the very best they can by following these best management practices. One point to make here- The author has found that almost every farm she's been on are 85-95% of the way to being verified. The sign is just the finishing touch.
2. Know that farmers are always concerned about their farm and land they farm. Many are very aware that neighbor relations may need to be improved after going through MAEAP, and many try to improve them, but in all reality if you move into a farming community be prepared for smells, dust, and large equipment during certain times of the year.
3. Farmers choose to participate in MAEAP which makes them more likely to complete all the steps as money and time allows.
4. Preserving natural resources and particularly ground water is a concern to farmers and many enjoy the outdoors like you do and want to preserve nature for everyone to enjoy.

Looking to the future

MAEAP is feeling some pressure to be even more sustainable and at least try to help farms compete with other types of sustainability labels that end users require. Farmers don't want to have to do more work to meet another label requirement when MAEAP often already fits the bill. Those discussions are already happening.

How to participate?

If you farm in any capacity, no matter how big or small, you can participate in MAEAP. The technician's time is free to you. Jodi DeHate covers Missaukee, Wexford, Kalkaska, and Crawford counties. You can reach her at 231-839-7193 or jodi.dehate@macd.org. Alex Svodoba covers Osceola, Clare, and half of Lake Counties. He can be reached at 231-465-8005 or alex.svodoba@macd.org



Infinity Micro farm's MAEAP verification signs



Irrigation uniformity check. Checking out if the pivot is putting out the correct amount of water.



Manure Management is a big concern to farmers