

New Agent Promotes Balance In Farm Profitability, Environment

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NEW HOLLAND (Lancaster Co.) — For most of his career, Leon Ressler has been searching for the proper balance — whether it was working in the midst of bickering Kenya, East Africa clans to promote increased farm efficiency or in his current role as the new environment/ag systems extension agent for the county.

Ressler believes that concessions have to be made between those who live and work on the farm and urban neighbors who moved to nearby homes and don't understand farming. In addition, both have to more carefully consider the environment.

Either way, Ressler begins his new assignment in light of impending nutrient management laws and will be bringing farmers up to date on what they will have to do when the laws are passed.

Recently, Pa. H.B. 496, a nutrient management bill, was passed in the House of Representatives by a 138-62 vote that would require farmers to file nutrient management plans with the Department of Environmental Resources (DER). The bill now goes before the state Senate. If passed, the plans, according to a member of the House, would regulate the amount of nutrients farmers use on their fields and prevent the farmers from overfertilizing.

Write plans

When that bill, or a similar one, finally becomes law, it will be Ressler's job to work on the "phase-in process" — to assist in helping a farmer write the plans and to answer questions regarding nutrient management.

"I think there's a balance there," said Ressler. "I think if we're going to be productive long-term, we're going to have to be good stewards of the resources that we have. And that involves protecting our water supply and our soils."

Ressler, who is based in the Lancaster Extension Office in the Farm and Home Center, will be working to improve the environmental compatibility of farms as well as their profitability.

Ressler believes that the nutrient law could be enacted by year's end, and would be several years before the law "totally takes effect." The law would pertain to farmers with more than two animal units per acre and would require a written plan. It appears there will be a certification program and the conservation districts will be responsible for spot checks in terms of compliance, according to Ressler.

Project associate

The extension agent, with a B.S. degree in agronomy and plant science from Penn State, was formerly serving as a regional extension agent in nutrient management, covering a 10-county area. In his new position, he will concentrate on Lancaster County and deal with a "broader range of environmental issues related to agriculture, including water quality, pesticide safety, and rural/urban interface issues," he said. He has also served as a project associate for the Penn State Rural Clean Water Program in the Upper Conestoga Watershed. Before joining the extension, Ressler was employed on a Lancaster Co. dairy farm. Previously, he served six years as manager of the Ogwedhi-Sigawa

Community Development project in Kenya, East Africa.

That multi-pronged development effort in Kenya, according to Ressler, was funded and managed by the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, Salunga, Pa.

In Africa, Ressler served as a "catalyst," he said, to bring in ideas to stimulate the local farm economy. He worked with two clans, one with a nomadic cattle herd population and another with small-scale cultivation practices. The farms in Kenya were very small-scale, and he helped begin cultivation using oxen rather than hand hoeing.

The project, said Ressler, was "an attempt to get the groups working together in some peaceful development activities, and to resolve some hostilities at the border." He said that an evangelistic outreach to the non-Christian Masai people was a focus of the project.

Balance input

But for farmers here, Ressler intends to promote what nutrient management means — "to balance your nitrogen input with crop removal, so you don't have a surplus."

What this means is that for farms who show an excess of manure, and need to get rid of it, Ressler will have on hand a list of farms who want to purchase it. Ressler will provide information for those who want to sell the manure to help them locate other farms that need the nutrients.

"One of the things I learned is there's a lot of people out there who would be willing to accept someone else's manure," he said. "In fact, I've found three times as many people sign up and say I would like to find some than I would have some to move."

During the next five years, Ressler envisions that manure processing facilities could begin operation in this area. "Probably either a number of small ones for composting, or maybe a centralized location for something like pelletizing," he said.

Manure exporting

More manure exporting will take place, which is already going on with poultry and other types of manure.

If a farmer has an excessive amount of nitrogen as determined by a nitrogen test, then increased acreage of crops that consume the nitrogen (particularly corn and rye) may have to be planted.

If proper balance is achieved, then much of the excess nitrogen that accumulated in the soil will be leached out and levels will drop.

"The idea is to bring things into balance," he said. But farmers should be aware that nitrogen in water supplies also comes from other sources, such as rainfall, certain legume crops (alfalfa, for instance), and sources such as septic systems.

Interpret findings

Ressler will help farmers determine what to do about nitrogen applications. However, his office will not perform the testing services, but will notify them how they can obtain the service and help them interpret the findings.

Ressler will also help in balancing conflicts between urbanites and farmers.

"We try to encourage farmers to be as sensitive as possible to their neighbors," he said. "And we try to help urbanites understand what's involved in farming and what some of the things are that go with farming, like fly problems, odor problems, and noise."

"There's going to have to be concessions made to allow farmers to farm and accept some of the apparent unpleasanties to the urbanites that go with that," he said. "On the other hand, we can help farmers find ways to minimize odors, minimize flies, and be sensitive to the noise and other things which can be an irritance to their neighbors."

Ability to farm

Ressler doesn't think that complying with the law will adversely affect the ability to farm.

"Nutrient management isn't really a threat — it's something that will help sustain our environmental quality and therefore productive ability," said Ressler. "I think they are definitely intertwined. You can abuse your resources short-term and perhaps get away with it, but in the long term, it's going to catch up with you."

"So I don't see profitability and environmental compatibility as being antagonistic," he said. "I think they go together. And I think we need to work at finding ways to be profitable and environmentally compatible."

Ressler lives on an 8-acre farm in Peach Bottom, Pa. with his wife, LouAnn and sons Lynn, 9; Lee, 6; Lyle, 1; and daughter Lorielle, 4.



Leon Ressler is the new environment/ag systems extension agent for Lancaster County. Here, he looking at a starter fertilizer test plot on the Walter Clair Martin farm south of New Holland.

No State Budget In Sight, Ag Laws Progress

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HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — State legislators did not provide any hope of having a balanced budget proposal ready for Gov. Robert Casey to sign by midnight Sunday, but several agricultural bills progressed this past week.

According to several Senate sources, work on the budget has not gone well and chances of a state budget being signed by deadline, midnight Sunday was nil.

While the Legislature will be in session Sunday, some in the Senate have speculated that a budget may be possible by Wednesday, but others closer to Senate deliberations have said it may extend for up to two weeks.

Even though a budget is not in place at the start of the new state fiscal year, Monday, state employees would still receive a paycheck on July 12, since they are for the most part, paid on a two-week delay.

The only reason for any failure in paying state employees would be if current funds were not available. The decision to not pay would have to be made by Casey. In other action, on Tuesday, several pieces of agricultural legislation moved out of the Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, which is chaired by Sen. Edward Helfrick.

Five pieces of proposed legislation, and amendments, moved, including two Senate bills introduced by Helfrick.

Among those receiving action this past week were Senate Bill 1066 (Helfrick), which calls for subsidies for the purchase of multi-

peril crop insurance, and SB 1067 (Helfrick), which amends the act of 1981 originally introduced by Sen. Noah Wenger, for the authorization of the creation of agricultural areas. The amendment to SB 1067 further provides for agricultural easements and dedicates more funds toward farmland preservation.

Agricultural legislation which originated in the House of Representatives was moved out of the Senate agriculture committee:

- HB175, regulating refrigeration of eggs;
- HB401, which amends the commodities program act to change the voting requirements for program continuance from a two-thirds vote to a simple majority;
- HB1344, which creates an Agriculture and Rural Youth Organization Grant Program to establish a revolving fund for supporting rural youth activities, including 4-H and FFA.

On Wednesday, the House of Representatives approved nutrient management legislation, which now goes to the Senate for consideration.

The legislation would establish an animal-density threshold, over which producers would be required to keep on file with the local conservation district a plan for disposing of animal waste and applying nutrients.

The legislation, introduced by Rep. Kenneth Cole, chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, and which has received support from a number of agricultural organizations, continued to receive criticism from Rep. John Barley.

Barley, in a news release made immediately following the passage of the legislation in the House, warned that, if made law, nutrient management legislation would "severely restrict farmers' ability to utilize their lands."

Barley, who is involved in a large beef and crop operation, said in the release, "House Bill 496, which I oppose, would require farmers to file nutrient management plans with the Department of Environmental Resources (DER). These plans would regulate the amount of nutrients farmers use on their fields and prevent from overfertilizing."

In the release, Barley repeats a call to have the state Department of Agriculture take on the entire responsibility for administering the nutrient management program, something PDA officials testified they are not in the position to do.

However PDA has supported the legislation's establishing the agriculture department with creating and administering a certification program.

