

Water Quality Tour Looks At Four Berks County Farms

Sound Conservation Practices Take Commitment, Time

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Feeg Dairy
Womelsdorf

The entire "package" of conservation was highlighted at the Roland Feeg Dairy Farm in Womelsdorf. Altogether, Feeg farms 390 acres of corn, wheat, soybeans, and hay.

"This is a fine example of as nice a farmland package as you can get in Berks County," said Randy McCormack, Berks County district conservationist, who provided a tour of the conservation practices at the dairy.

One of the long-term commitments Feeg made began in 1962, when his father-in-law installed sod waterways to protect the soil from leaving the farm by capturing runoff.

In the years since, according to John Fior, soil conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service), Feeg has installed 6,800 feet of grass waterways and 3,300 feet of diversions on the farm.

Total surface drainage is 15,700 feet.

Feeg maintains 120 milking cows and 60 young stock of Holstein cows. Manure is stored in an earthen waste storage pond with a concrete bottom, which holds 4-6 months of storage. The capacity of the lagoon is 250,000 gallons, which is pumped out and spread three times per year in the spring and fall. Bedded packed manure from dry cow and young stock

facilities is spread every 2-3 months.

McCormack said that the manure is looked on not as a waste, but as a resource to match the crop needs.

Feeg said his manure has been tested and reports that it is good for the farm. Soil tests show that he needs potassium, but phosphorous levels are good on the farm.

Contour strips are maintained on 196 acres, and field strip-cropping totals 151 acres, according to the conservation district.

Between the sod waterways (planted with tall fescue and perennial ryegrass), the contours are rotated for one year in beans, two years of corn, and back to wheat.

McCormack said, "By putting these practices in, we're cutting erosion 50 to 75 percent."

To maintain water quality on the Feeg Dairy, roof water flows to an 8-inch pipe to a grass diversion. Also, to make use of an existing spring, 2-inch pipe brings fresh spring water from a springbox to a cement trough at the rate of about 250 gallons per minute. Feeg said the trough, in winter, never freezes.

Clyde Myers, Berks extension agent, told those at the tour that many of the practices took 30 years or more to develop and provide a fine example of what conservation farmers are doing in the county to protect water quality.

Martin Dairy
Womelsdorf

At the Floyd Martin dairy in

Womelsdorf, one big conservation practice involves combining stormwater runoff from the barn and milkhouse roofs into an 8-inch pipe into a culvert at the edge of his farm.

The pipe is protected by a screen, called a "critter barrier," to keep the pipe open when it rains.

Martin, who operates a 40 cow (milking) and 30 (young stock) dairy, has implemented an array of conservation practices to protect water flowing into the Tulpehocken Creek. One of those is 2,255 feet of streambank fencing used in conjunction with a crushed stone cattle crossing over the Tulpehocken.

The fencing was installed with the use of Act 319 cost-share money. The fencing not only benefits the cows, but prevents erosion by keeping the cows out of the creek.

Martin said he maintains growth around the fencing by positioning posts close to the creek and using a weed whacker to trim only the larger, more troublesome weeds.

Clyde Myers, extension agent, said, "We hope more farmers will consider stream bank fencing. We think it's a win/win situation, both from an animal aspect and a water quality aspect."

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Money from ASCS to finance stream bank protection is "drying up," said Jack Schonely, Berks County Conservation District manager. As a result, the districts and extension are looking for ways to help the farmers finance the fencing, which Schonely said acts as "buffer zones to lessen the sediment going into the Blue Marsh Lake."

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Dehart Farm
Mt. Aetna

Some of the conservation practices were installed decades ago at the Dehart Farm, formerly the Bohn Farm, now operated by John Schueller in Mt. Aetna.

The farm includes 225 acres of corn, soybeans, and alfalfa.

Some of the cropland terraces, according to tour guide John Fior of NRCS, built before 1980 had "lifespans only about 20 years

without major overhaul work." The dairy operated by Schueller includes 55 milking and 45 head of young stock. The farm totals about 291 acres, of which about 225 are tillable, according to Schueller. Half of the acres are in cropland terraces.

At the farm, stream bank fencing includes 3,655 feet of high tensile wire. Two cattle crossings are made of concrete waffle slats. A stream bank filter strip is used to stabilize the stream banks, with controlled grazing in a fenced area.

Diversions total 3,300 feet, and

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During the tour, 10 students from Tulpehocken High School in Bernville also inspected the conservation practices at the Feeg Farm. Christine Williams, ag science instructor at Tulpehocken, explained that the students, studying environmental agriculture, were looking at the various water quality control techniques on the farms.



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This concrete settlement basin is the mainstay of barnyard runoff control at the dairy operated by Wilbur and Arlene Hershey in Bethel.



The settlement basin, constructed at a cost of \$7,500 with Chesapeake Bay program cost-share money, collects a little more than a foot of manure and prevents it from running to a farm pond within a 100 yards of the barnyard. Wilbur Hershey, with hands on fencing in center, inspects the basin.