

Livestock Certification Course Teaches Law, Public Relations

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LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.) — A free seminar for Pennsylvania producers has helped agriculture representatives learn important information about the law, public relations, and current agricultural practices.

Those attending a recent course conducted at the Lancaster Farm and Home Center took four tests to become environmentally certified through the Penn State Livestock Certification Course.

The voluntary, one-day event included four sessions and subsequent tests to achieve certification. The training sessions, sponsored by Penn State University, Penn Ag Industries, and the Pennsylvania Conservation Districts, were conducted in seven counties across the commonwealth.

Public Awareness

Amy Van Blarcom, public liaison in cooperation with PennAg Industries Association and the Pennsylvania Conservation District, working through a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, covered public perception, the perception of agriculture's role as a polluter, and community relations topics in her presentation.

"The public is very unaware of what agriculture is about, even though producers are doing a good job at education," said Van Blarcom. "What they think they're believing isn't the actual issue. Producers need to not only sell their product but the environment as well. Let the public know best

management practices are being followed."

Van Blarcom quoted a 1999 study from the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation that stated, "Unfortunately, the level of knowledge that Americans have on environmental subjects does not match up to what they think they know. . . Americans have an A+ for support of the environment and an F for understanding of causes of basic environmental problems in the 21st century."

Communication is key in informing, educating, and promoting agriculture to the public. If a producer is planning an expansion, "let your neighbors know ahead of time they may not agree but will appreciate you told them your plans; communications builds trust that you're not doing anything behind their back," she said.

Do not use technical terms when dealing with the media or the public, said Van Blarcom. Be responsive, not just offering lip service to the public, and establish credibility by finding answers promptly.

Get your permits in order and talk to everyone you should, said Van Blarcom. The best defense against a formal complaint or lawsuit is complying with regulations and careful documentation.

A successful community relations plan includes "selling" the operation, she said. Inform the public of your nutrient management plan, conservation award, or involvement in clean water programs. "Let the people know you're doing a great thing," she said.

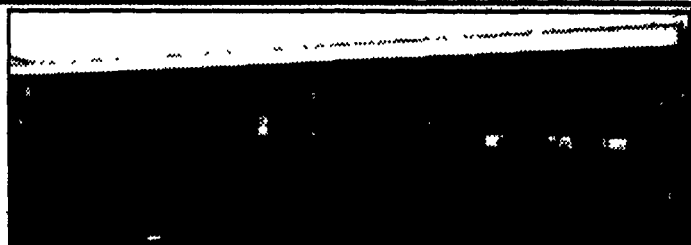
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