

Agriculture Insights

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WATER LEGISLATION AND AGRICULTURE

Many of us may have viewed water as something with an unlimited supply, something we all take for granted. But, in the past six years, we have faced four years with a drought situation in Pennsylvania.

Currently, 24 counties in southeastern Pennsylvania are in a drought emergency. We are starting to look at water as something that is a limited resource — something we need to plan and protect for the future.

During the past few years, legislation on the issue has focused on water quality rather than quantity. This is now changing because of the circumstances we are facing. Our state water plan has not been revised

since 1975. Many organizations and businesses are voicing their concerns and recommendations on this issue.

It is important that agriculture weighs in on this planning, since estimates indicate agriculture makes up 20 percent of total consumptive water use in the Susquehanna River Basin.

A critical area to keep at the forefront on future planning is the volume of groundwater recharge our farmland provides through rainwater infiltration. Simply put, an average-size dairy farm with 60 cows on 85 acres provides more than 30 million gallons of net contribution to groundwater. This takes into account all water consumed on the farm. Another interesting statistic is that one acre of farmland collects enough rainwater

(400,000 gallons per year) to supply seven households per year.

Looking at current regulations in place regarding water use, the following items impact agriculture to some degree. In 1995, the Susquehanna River Basin Commission (SRBC) adopted a regulation that requires all surface and groundwater withdrawals of more than 10,000 gallons per day be registered. Estimates indicate only 25 percent of the farms that exceed this level of withdrawal have registered their water use.

You might ask yourself, why would I want to register my water use? The answer is simple — you are documenting your daily needs, which puts you in a stronger legal position should conflict occur. When one of your neighbors wants to withdraw a new large daily amount of water, he or she must register with the SRBC before doing so. The SRBC reviews the potential impacts of the new water withdrawal to all current water withdrawals registered within the area.

Another potential impact on larger farms is a requirement to address water consumption. This regulation temporarily excludes agricultural uses, but it is something to keep in mind for the future as these regulations change. The regulation states that operations which consumptively use more than 20,000 gallons per day are required to compensate for their

use during critical low flows by utilizing one of three options: 1. Suspending use during low flows. 2. Releasing stored water upstream or utilizing water stored on-site during low flows. 3. Paying the SRBC a consumptive use fee \$.14 per 1,000 gallons) for water used consumptively. This fee would be used to develop and store water during critical low flows. These options obviously would create an economic burden to farms, thus the reason to be temporarily suspended. Currently the Agriculture Water Use Advisory Committee is carefully exploring options for agriculture operations.

There are several pieces of legislation being considered in Pennsylvania, with one of the more important bills being House Bill 2230. This bill is in the House Committee on Environmental Resources and Energy and would require the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to revise the state's water plan over the next three years and require the plan to be updated every five years. This bill would also establish a 25-person Statewide Water Resources Advisory Committee to help develop state water policies, require users of water exceeding 10,000 gallons per day to register and report their annual

water use, and begin to determine areas in Pennsylvania where water demand exceeds supply so a "water budget" can be established.

Registration of water use for agriculture should be a reasonable process for a farmer to go through with limited burdens on registration fees, monitoring, and reporting requirements. Water use planning needs to take into consideration the recharge aspect that farmland provides and offer water credits based on criteria set. Another recommendation would be to have appropriate representation from agriculture on water planning boards. And lastly, it is important to address the costs surrounding the plugging of abandoned water wells with grant monies.

Now is the time to weigh in on proposed water regulations. There is an upcoming Rally Day for Agriculture sponsored by PennAg Industries, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, and Pennsylvania State Grange on Monday, April 8 from 3 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. at the State Capitol Rotunda. For more information on water legislation or the Rally Day for Agriculture, contact Brent Landis at the Chamber at (717) 397-3531, ext. 134 or blandis@lcci.com.



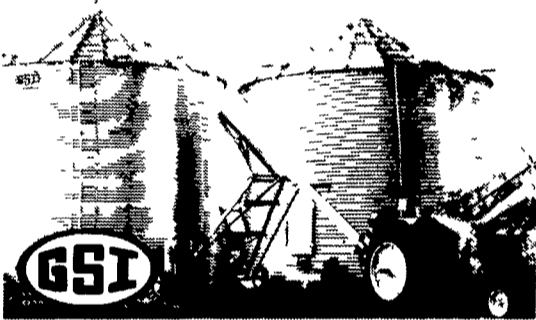
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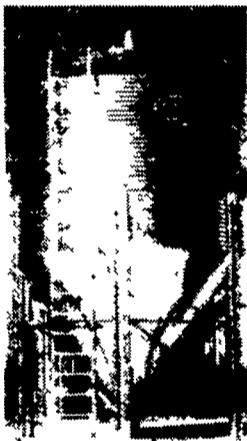


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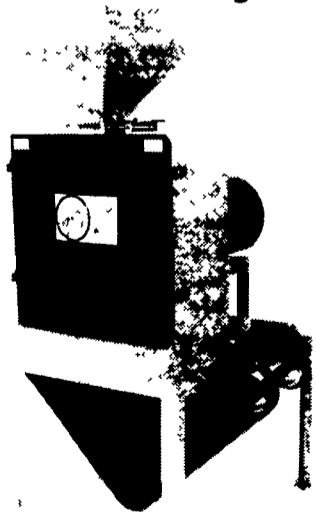
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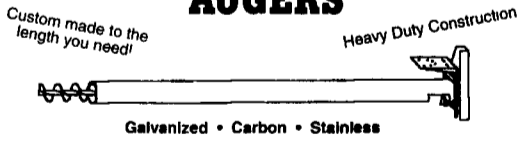
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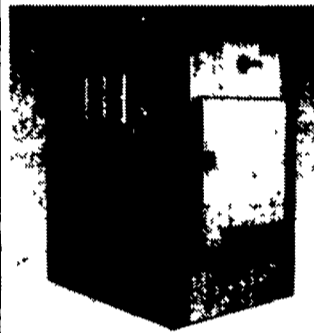
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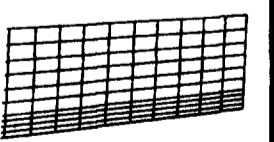
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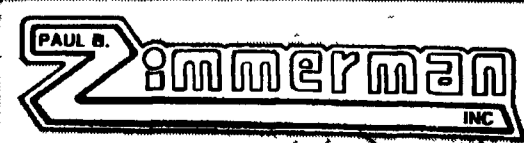


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