

Penn State **Extension**

Conservation Dialogue

Farm Bill Forum Synthesis |

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Jim Brubaker, owner and operator of Buffalo Valley Farms, Union County, provided the keynote address at the October 2011 Forum on the Future Farm Bill and Conservation Programs at Fort Hunter Park, Dauphin Co. His message focused on the need for good science in coordination with the producers and the landscapes they manage to ensure best environmental and production outcomes.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE The importance of access to technical assistance was a common theme throughout the discussions of both successes and challenges when designing and implementing conservation practices across the state. Technical assistance is especially critical for populations who might not receive cost share funding through the Farm Bill (the example of the Plain Sect community was given), but would otherwise welcome informed input on farm practices ranging from no-till to manure pit design and more.

TARGETED WATERSHEDS The issue of targeted watershed approaches was another common theme throughout these discussions, and one in which not everyone agreed on whether targeting funding was the best way to allocate funding and other resources. Generally speaking, receptiveness to the idea of targeted approaches was directly correlated to one's proximity to the targeted area. This speaks to a sense of ownership and community within our local watersheds that is often difficult for external participants to appreciate. In other words, farmers and other conservation partners living within a targeted watershed area were much more likely to see firsthand the benefits of funding targeted to those areas and therefore appreciate and support the approach than individuals less-directly connected to that landscape. Producers cited both the Conewago Initiative, Lancaster County-based and efforts in Centre County as spe-

ABOUT THE CONSERVATION DIALOGUE

Over the past year, Penn State Extension in partnership with the Packard Foundation has sought to bring Pennsylvania agricultural producers and conservation partners together to examine conservation programs implemented in the current Farm Bill and how they're working for Pennsylvania's producers and how they could be improved upon to work better. The goal of this ongoing discussion is to identify and promote policy suggestions for the Conservation Title of the 2012 Farm Bill and to give Pennsylvania's producers a voice in that process.

Producers and conservation partners came together at several venues across the state beginning at Ag Progress Days, but an October 21, 2011 Farm Bill Forum was convened in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania for the exclusive purpose of honing in on priorities,

suggestions, and challenges for lawmakers to consider when drafting the next Conservation Title. The synthesis of ideas gathered there serves as a foundation for continued discussions for the coming year. While the synthesis spans many programs and agricultural circumstances across the state, please do not view it as comprehensive or complete. Instead, it's a conversation starter, and we look forward to further development and refinement as discussions move forward.

PENNSYLVANIA'S CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORIES

When agricultural producers and conservation partners were asked to discuss farm conservation success stories, there was no shortage of examples of conservation practices working well for Pennsylvania farms. Producers and partners alike are eager to share stories from specific farms and those stories largely fell into the following categories.

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cific success stories associated with targeted watershed approaches.

SENSE OF PLACE Producers emphasized the importance of community-based approaches and investments as opposed to a more 'silo-ed' approach of farm-by-farm investment. Instilling a stronger sense of farmland as part of the community as opposed to apart from community fosters stronger relationships and appreciation.

FOREST MANAGEMENT Pennsylvania producers recognize the importance of forest management practices, specifically funded through EQIP as being essential to conservation practices across the state. This was particularly at the forefront of people's minds at the October 21st forum, as the state had just experienced record flooding events the month prior. Other successful practices mentioned included the elimination of invasive species, regeneration of oak, and the incorporation of agroforestry plans into farm systems.

PRODUCER CHOICE & FLEXIBILITY One particularly poignant topic of discussion was the implementation of on-farm conservation practices in the absence of federal financial support. Producers recognized that many conservation practices (like cover cropping and no-till) had ancillary benefits that made them attractive for implementation regardless of availability of cost-share programs.

WIN-WIN Producers offered many examples of on-farm conservation practices that had substantial benefits, both economically and environmentally, while also improving day-to-day management of the farm itself. Barnyard improvements were accompanied in environmental benefits with improved animal herd health; and practices implemented on heavy animal use areas resulted improved feed-pads, decreased ero-

sion, and improved animal welfare.

PROGRAMS THAT WORK The Grassland Reserve Program was noted for contributing to significant improvements in soil and water quality as well as decreasing labor expenses.

PEER-TO-PEER Showcasing examples of conservation practices really excites producers. Everyone agrees that seeing a practice in action is the best way to gain support for it among other producers (and potential adopters). No-till and manure injection showcases in counties around the state offered peer-to-peer education and maximized technology transfer. Manure to energy projects illustrated multiple economic and environmental benefits.

CONSERVATION WITH ECONOMIC SAFETY NETS Additional success stories included examples from conservation insurance programs to shelter producers from economic loss while trying out a new conservation practice to connecting producers to local farmers markets, reducing the application of pesticides, and integrating production of multiple horticultural and animal products to insulate producers from market fluctuations.

TRUSTED AGENTS AND PARTNERS Pennsylvania's producers identified a very long list of critical partners aiding in the success of adoption and implementation of conservation practices across the state. While the list is too long to be included here, the important take away from this is that sometimes the most successful partnerships were happening among groups that might not be the typical partnerships. For example, while Conservation Districts are an obvious and highly regarded resource for Pennsylvania producers seeking to implement conservation practices, producers also pointed to less obvious partnerships like local (small) colleges and universities, Amish Bishops, and utility compa-

nies. NRCS, state agencies, and Extension were also critical partners in conservation practices. Producers specifically noted two underutilized opportunities for increased partnership – consumers and urban/suburban residents. This points to a greater desire to connect the non-farming community to their food sources and urban residents to their agricultural producer neighbors.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS FOR PENNSYLVANIA PRODUCERS

While discussing all of the success stories and working relationships, producers and conservation partners also acknowledged shortcomings in relationships and conservation funding in the Farm Bill that provide unique opportunity for improvement in the 2012 Farm Bill. Even successful conservation practice implementation often encountered several unforeseen (or in some cases, foreseen) barriers to adoption that had to be addressed. In other cases, sometimes these barriers prove to be too great to overcome. For this discussion, we'll break these challenges into four manageable categories: (1) Producer behavior (2) technological barriers (3) logistical hurdles and (4) appropriateness for Pennsylvania producers.

PRODUCER BEHAVIOR Sometimes, adopting a new conservation practice requires a shift in how a producer runs his operation, and this can understandably be a daunting prospect, especially if little can be done to guarantee success or at least protect against failures. Sometimes, producers are just reluctant to change because what they've been doing works well for them and it's difficult to anticipate future benefits from adopting a new practice. These are understandable hurdles that could be addressed to large extent with further on-site demonstra-

tions, enhanced knowledge sharing among producers, and increased technical assistance to interested producers.

TECHNOLOGICAL BARRIERS Technological barriers often represent significant hurdles as well. Even with cost-sharing from Farm Bill Conservation programs, some of these conservation practices represent a substantial cost to the farmer, one that is sometimes too great to justify. The funding structure for technical assistance is also not steady and secure. Financing the equipment to implement these projects can be a very real hurdle to adoption.

LOGISTICAL HURDLES Logistically, there are many other barriers to the adoption of conservation practices. The paperwork associated with participating in these programs can be a daunting, off-putting downside. Program names, rules, and endless acronyms often imply a layer of complexity that is really unnecessary. The entry points into many of these programs are confusing and complicated, and the wait times to participate are (perceived to be) too long. Finally, a lack of coordination between multiple programs can be stifling as well.

APPROPRIATENESS FOR PENNSYLVANIA PRODUCERS In some cases, the appropriateness of some Conservation Title programs to PA producers isn't quite on the mark. This was most evident in the CREP program.

NEXT STEPS

Here we've outlined many unique opportunities and challenges to conserving Pennsylvania's working lands. Throughout the next year, we hope to have many more conversations with conservation-minded producers and partners so that we can facilitate engagement among individuals at the federal policy-making level. Our lawmakers need

Walt Whitmer, Penn State Extension Community & Economic Development Educator, along with Jennifer Fetter, Youth Water Resources Educator, facilitates break-out session at Fort Hunter Park during Forum on the Next Farm Bill and Conservation Programs. Participants included producers, service providers, county-, state- and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, trade organizations, educators, and members of the private sector.



to hear directly from Pennsylvania producers about what works and what doesn't. In a time when funding dollars will be limited and heavily scrutinized, it is critically important to ensure that each program and its associated funding are constructed and implemented in the most efficient way possible – the most conservation for the buck! Please join us in this ongoing conversation and take an active role in defining what the next Conservation Title will look like.

INVITATION The synthesis of input represented here is also posted online. Please provide your stated preferences and priorities by participating in the survey at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/CDSynthesisNews>

FOR MORE INFO

For more information about the *Conservation Dialogue*, visit: www.extension.psu.edu/aec where producers can sign up for updates and participate in the Farmer Survey. Program sponsored by Penn State Cooperative Extension with funding from the David and Lucille Packard Foundation.

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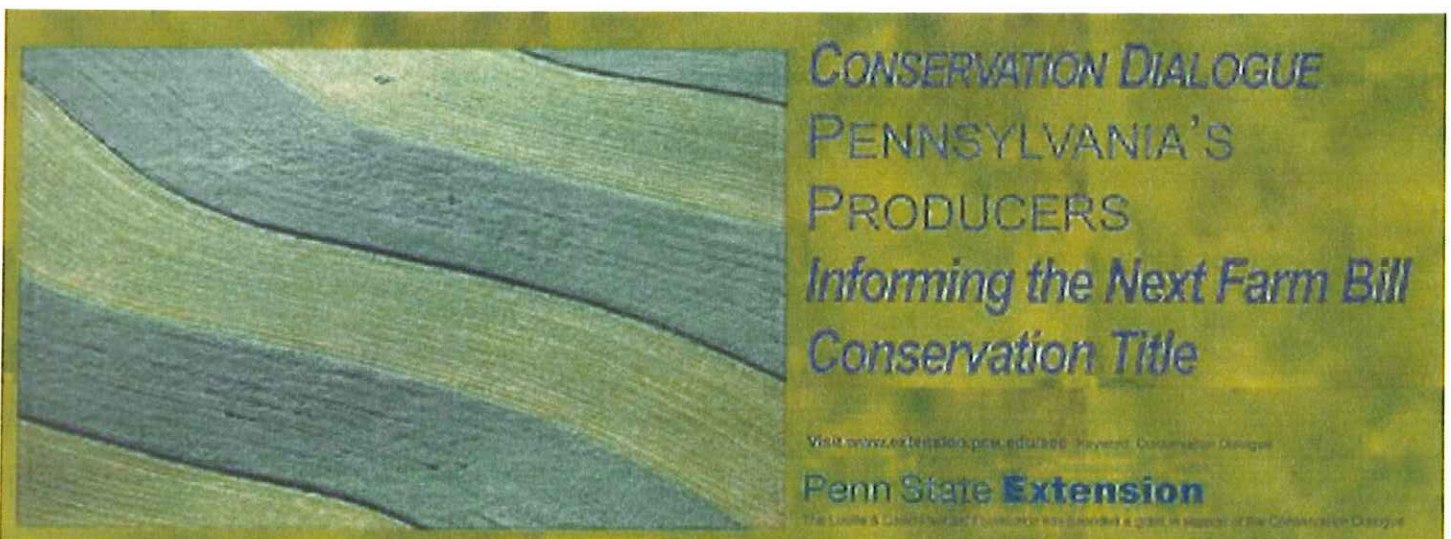
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