



# NEW YORK STATE ENVIRONMENTAL EXCELLENCE AWARD CASE STUDY

**New York State Soil and Water Conservation Committee** – *Honored for taking an incentive-based approach to agricultural management.*

## SUMMARY

New York State's Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) Program, awarded in 2008, serves as a national model of how a voluntary, incentive-based approach to agricultural management can successfully protect and enhance soil and water resources, while preserving the economic viability of a diverse agricultural community. AEM assists farmers in making practical, cost-effective decisions that result in the sustainable use of New York's natural resources.



## BENEFITS

In 2008, more than 10,000 New York State farm families were participating in New York's Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) Program. To remain economically viable, farmers must be vigilant about protecting environmental resources, especially water quality. While there are no perfect land uses, well-managed farms can protect water quality by contributing far less polluted runoff when compared with most other land uses. Where agricultural runoff concerns do occur, they can be remedied by implementing AEM practices.

## KEY METRICS

- 600 concentrated animal feeding operations participating as of the award
- 43 certified AEM planners across New York State
- 10,000 participating farms in 2008

## ABOUT AGRICULTURAL ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

- Comprises the NYS Soil and Water Conservation Committee, State Department of Agriculture, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and USDA.

***NYS Environmental Excellence Award:*** Annual recognition of outstanding innovative and sustainable projects or programs and unique partnerships that are improving and protecting New York State's environmental resources and contributing to a stronger economy

## A MODEL OF EXCELLENCE

- Integrates access to many state and federal programs and coordinates the services of state and local agencies and private consultants
- Provides means to comply with regulations and improve water quality objectives while meeting farmers' business goals
- AEM planners are certified by the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets to develop comprehensive nutrient management plans
- Inspires farms to establish vegetative buffers through New York State's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program to improve water quality
- As of 2008, USDA committed to pay \$13 million to 400 farms for installation and maintenance of vegetative buffers

## HIGHLIGHTS

The New York State Soil and Water Conservation Committee's AEM Program is a voluntary, incentive-based program. County Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) and other partners deliver information/education and technical assistance so that farmers are able to operate cleaner and greener while competing in today's global market. The program provides a systematic approach to assess and prioritize areas of concern; document current stewardship; develop farm-specific conservation plans to more wisely manage farm operations; and implement and evaluate environmentally sound practices to ensure regulatory compliance and economic viability.

Farm conservation plans are costly to develop and require additional funds to implement. However, even in times of fiscal constraints, the AEM Program has been able to facilitate the successful development of farm plans for New York State's 147 large concentrated animal feed lots (CAFOs). Farm plans have also been developed for 92% of the state's 472 medium-sized CAFOs. These plans are routinely evaluated by certified AEM planners to assure the public, regulators and farmers of high-quality results from the AEM Program.

Partnerships involved in the AEM process are outstanding and exemplary. The program depends upon cooperation among watershed organizations, academia, environmental conservation organizations, farming associations, business associations, and state and federal government agencies.

## FUNDING

Allocations from the New York State Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) and Congress have accelerated the AEM Base Funding Program, which supports districts in the systematic completion of the AEM process on farms in priority watersheds. Launched in 2005, this non-competitive grant program provided \$500,000 in state funds and \$800,000 in federal funds to 52 districts who used a watershed approach to develop and implement county AEM strategic plans. These plans prioritize agricultural concerns and opportunities and target available resources to maximize environmental benefits.