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"Not quite paradise, but a nice place to live."

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"FARM*A*SYST" Pollution Prevention Inventories To Protect Salmon Creek and Cayuga Lake Watersheds

- By Matthew Shulman

A farm pollution risk assessment program, called FARM*A*SYST, designed to allow producers to identify potential surface and groundwater contamination sources on their farms, is getting underway in the Lansing portion of the Salmon Creek watershed as a pilot program that may be expanded to the entire state.

Based on a successful Wisconsin program, the Tompkins County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) is sponsoring FARM*A*SYST to protect Cayuga Lake from potential sources of agricultural pollution.

What's the Need?

Several years ago Congress started to shift the USDA's emphasis from commodity-based to environmental protection-based conservation programs, explained Cornell Sr. Extension Associate Peter Wright. The 1996 Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP) has taken an interest in looking at the environmental benefits of livestock programs that prevent water pollution, particularly in areas with significant human settlement.

The Finger Lakes region was recently designated as the top state priority by the National Resource Conservation Service's State Technical Committee. Our region was selected in part because our lakes lie entirely within New York and in part because it is easier to avoid potential pollution and maintain the Finger Lakes' good water quality rather than to correct future problems that might have been prevented.

"We know that there are going to be increased pressures on Cayuga Lake," said Wright. Pressures will come from shifts in land use, non-point agricultural pollution, recreational effluent, commercial/industrial effluent, 'gunk' running off parking lots and roadways, suburban pesticide use, etc. "We don't expect drastic changes in the fairly good quality of Cayuga Lake water," explained Wright, "but preventive programs like FARM*A*SYST are designed to be sure it won't get worse."

"We want to pilot test FARM*A*SYST in the 22,000 acre Lansing portion of the Salmon Creek watershed because it's a major tributary that feeds directly into Cayuga Lake," explained SWCD program assistant Wendy Sherwood.

How Does FARM*A*SYST WORK?

FARM*A*SYST is a confidential and voluntary program that producers can use to analyze 15 different types of pollution risks associated with their farming operations. These include pathogens, barnyard management, manure storage and use, petroleum storage, fertilizer storage and use, pesticide storage and use, drinking water, milking center washwater, silage seepage, soil management, stream-wetland & floodplain management, pasture management, forest management, waste disposal and farm household wastewater/ septic management.

For each potential type of pollution, FARM*A*SYST offers a set of concern sheets, risk evaluation worksheets and Best Management Practices factsheets. The concern sheets describe how certain practices might pose an environmental risk. The risk evaluation worksheets ask specific questions about the farm structures and the operator's daily activities. Completed worksheets establish numerical risk levels so farmers can hierarchize potential problems. The fact sheets make suggestions about the use of Best Management Practices (BMPs). By using these BMPs, a farmer can best allocate his/her resources to remediation actions with the greatest environmental payoff. Also included are names and numbers of agencies where farmers can obtain advice and/or technical assistance.

Local Reactions

The Lansing Community News met with two dairy operators (one on either side of Salmon Creek) to learn how they viewed the FARM*A*SYST program.

David "Skip" Hardie and Steve Paladino and 10 full-time employees operate Hardie Farms on the east side of the creek. They currently milk about 625 Holsteins and have another 460 young stock. Because most of their animals live in free-stall barns, manure management is a continual concern to them.

Hardie Farms and 120 other northeast dairies formed an association and help fund Cornell manure management specialist Peter Wright's program. "Before, we had concerns about manure management," said Hardie. "Now we have someone who's seen hundreds of farms and can give us experience-based advice." The Hardie's also hire an outside consultant who monitors 13 sites (including streams, wells, ponds and culverts) to pick up traces of any nutrient runoff so remedial action can quickly be taken if needed.

In addition to manure management, Hardie Farms thinks the FARM*A*SYST worksheets might be useful in controlling silage seepage. The farm presently collects the seepage in a septic tank and pumps it to the manure storage lagoon. This works well most of the time, but a better solution is needed to control runoff when high intensity rains fall on the two acres of the silos' surface. On the other hand, the petroleum storage worksheets are irrelevant to Hardie because they already replaced all in-ground tanks with above-ground fuel storage.

On Lansingville Road on the west side of Salmon Creek, Chuck Benson operates a 900 acre dairy farm that's based on a rotational grazing rather than freestall feeding system. This means that for six months a year his animals feed and bed themselves on pasture as they "spread" their own manure. The net result for Benson is that he has less volume and lower concentrations of manure to manage.

On the other hand, Benson wants to use the FARM*A*SYST worksheets to determine risks associated with his in-ground petroleum storage tanks and barnyard runoff. "These are things we have to deal with," he said. "It will be useful to deal with these problems in a pro-active rather than reactive fashion."

The Next Step

Wendy Sherwood's got some travelling ahead of her in the upcoming weeks as she makes personal visits to most (if not all) the Lansing farms in the Salmon Creek watershed to introduce the FARM*A*SYST program and offer technical assistance to farmers who want to participate.

Farmers are business people who know that the public is paying closer attention to non-point source pollution, explained Wright. Though there's nobody in New York State who forces a producer to manage production and waste by-products, they know they need to have data to make wise choices. "Prudent operators will want to preventable situations that could later come back to haunt him," he concluded

InterNet Computer Connections Help Families' College Search

- By Matthew Shulman

With thousands of colleges to choose from, how can you pick the one that's best for you? Which schools offer the major that interests you AND the sports, art or music you crave AND the community service or spiritual path you want to follow AND is affordable?

Are there any new easy-to-use tools that can help parents better guide their college-bound children? Yes! The rapid spread of home computers and Internet access to thousands of farms and rural homes across New York State makes it possible for parents to help their youngsters evaluate virtually all of America's colleges.

Traditionally, guidance counselors have sparked high school students to initiate college searches. They work together at school to review and narrow the choice of prospective colleges. Students use college catalogues, promotional materials and commercial college guides, such as Barron's and Peterson's. In recent years, many high schools have purchased electronic database versions of these guides for use on school computers. Computer multi-media CD-ROM disks are now available that provide full-motion video clips of campus life; take viewers on virtual campus tours; and present collegians' testimonials.

Most parents get actively involved in the later part search process and when it becomes time to visit the 'short list' of potential schools. "Only a third of parents typically come to school to directly participate in the college search process," said Cornell Rural Schools Program Director Michael JosephMost of the time, parents have conversations with guidance counselors but are not present with their youngsters for initial college databases searches. Home access to on-line database searching is one tool to increase parental involvement at the early stages of a youngster's search.

Selecting a college in the late 1990's is a mixed blessing. The good news is that rural high school students have more academic and technical college choices than any previous generation. The bad news, says Joseph, is that rural collegians take longer to graduate than their urban and suburban classmates even though admission acceptance levels are comparable. "Rural parents' active involvement early in the college selection process can lessen this problem," he said.

Future college students and their families also face significant costs. "Colleges are competing like crazy for students," said Lansing High School guidance counselor Bill Heffner. "They offer innovative programs and use sophisticated admissions marketing, but economic competition is not yet a reality." Annual college costs range from $10,000 to $25,000. These pay for tuition and activity fees, as well as for room and board, textbooks and supplies, travel expenses and the student's living allowance. Actual expenses depend upon the student's choice of a private or public college, dormitory or private housing, frequency of travel home and the availability of in-state tuition, financial aid, etc.

Faced with longer matriculation and a steep annual price tag, making a wise selection becomes a critical family event. It's not enough to match a youngster's personal and career goals with schools' academic programs. Families must consider the young person's preferences in the context of available financial means, proposed college financial aid packages (scholarship grants, work-study jobs and loans) and the colleges' career placements of recent graduates.

Fortunately, some new tools are available to simplify this process. The rapidly expanding global computer network, known as the Internet, features nearly a dozen companies that offer college database searching tools. Students and parents can rapidly search for colleges to compare academic offerings and pricing information as well as identifying financial aid resources. By looking thoroughly at all the variables, parents and their children can jointly make the college choice decision that best fits their needs.

Database searching does not replace the high school guidance counselor. He (or, she) has a valuable network of college placement contacts and the in-school experience to sense where a student is likely to fit in and succeed. Yet, it can be a valuable supplemental tool to make the college selection process a family affair.

* * *

All Internet college databases are information categorization and retrieval systems. They consist of a collection of electronic files for each college, university or technical school. Each file organizes information about the college in structured categories, called 'fields.' Fields may include geographic location, enrollment, tuition, degrees, religious affiliation, etc. Each college database has an electronic sorting process, called a 'search engine,' which sorts through the entire database to identify the schools that correspond to selected criteria about each field.

The college search databases differ in several ways. Some are free while others provide fee-based access. They may or may not have all accredited schools in their databases. The information they contain about a given school or the way they classify information may also differ. Data-sorting search engines certainly differ in the ease (or, user-friendliness) of operation.

Though all Internet college database services have some positive points, two services stand out: *Peterson's Educational Center* and *CollegeNET*. Each has features that the other lacks. Used together, they can provide as much information as one could hope to have before visiting the campus. Both are free. Peterson's is at **http://www.petersons.com/ugrad/ugsector.html** and CollegeNET is at **http://www.collegenet.com**

Peterson's

Peterson's database contains information from 3,500 accredited undergraduate programs in the United States and Canada leading to two-year and four-year degrees. The user can request searches at two-year or four-year colleges by geographical location, academic program and/or religious affiliation. The four-year college database has 459 majors; the two-year database has 398 majors.

Let's see how this would work. Imagine a set of twins.

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