Michigan codifies program to help farmers meet environmental rules, encourage sound conservation practices

By Carolyn Orr

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The goal of the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program is to help farmers evaluate their operations to prevent agricultural pollution and environmental problems. Though the initiative has been part of the state Department of Agriculture budget since 2001, this year’s legislation (HB 4212) made the program a part of state statute. The program was a regional finalist for CSG’s Innovations Awards in 2005.

Through the program, farmers complete educational programs, on-farm risk assessments and third-party audit inspections of their operations. During the audits, the Michigan Department of Agriculture verifies that the state’s agricultural management practices are being followed and that the farm has implemented environmental and conservation practices as required for each type of production, including livestock, crops and greenhouses. (Indiana has a similar voluntary program for livestock farms only.)

Some of the activities addressed in the program include manure handling, prevention of soil erosion, and fuel handling, as well as fertilizer and pesticide storage and application.

Farms that complete the voluntary program can benefit from rebates, environmental cost-share incentives, tax credits and reduced liability-insurance premiums from participating companies. Several agriculture lenders have committed to reduced interest rates for verified farmers.

To maintain verification, producers must repeat the audit every three years. According to program administrators, approximately 10,000 farms have begun the process, and nearly 1,000 have completed all three phases of the program for their type of farm.

The average farm spends approximately $25,000 in conservation and environmental alterations to
become verified, and larger farms can spend up to $100,000. Costs include equipment, modifications to comply with state standards, implementing an “action plan” and participating in seminars. The cost for the state to manage and implement the program is about $550,000 annually.

The new legislation also sets up an advisory board made up of state agency leaders, farmers, representatives from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and representatives of nongovernmental conservation and environmental agencies.

The legislation has been a longtime goal of the bill’s sponsor, Rep. Kevin Daley, who is a farmer.

“[It] makes Michigan a leader in agricultural environmental stewardship,” Daley, a Republican, says. “By making it law, but keeping it a voluntary program, we believe more farmers will participate. And as the economy turns around, we hope to be able to provide farmers with more incentives to participate.”

Daley added that the legislation includes grant funding for technical assistance for participants, educational programs and demonstration projects.

HB 4212 was the first bill signed by Republican Gov. Rick Snyder, who said his administration would focus on finding incentives to motivate farmers to participate in the program.

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