

## *New York State AEM*

By Josh Bossard: Source Water Protection Specialist

In my previous article, I discussed potential problems and the benefits agriculture can have on drinking water supplies and water quality in general. I had briefly touched upon New York States adopted program for addressing agriculturally related non-point source pollution - Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM). In this article I want to give more of a general background on AEM, the AEM process, and how AEM relates to public water supplies.

New York State's Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM), signed into law in 2000, helps all agricultural operations identify and address farm related non-point source pollution. While many states have implemented agricultural regulations as a result of more stringent federal water quality standards, New York State has responded with a voluntary, incentive-based program. The AEM initiative grew from efforts in the New York City Watershed and expanded into the Skaneateles Lake Watershed (City of Syracuse). In order to comply with the Safe Drinking Water Act, New York City and the City of Syracuse were allowed to avoid filtration by implementing watershed management controls in their respective watersheds. The program was instituted to deal with the aspect of agricultural non-point source pollution in both watersheds. To fast forward, as of 2002's published AEM report, over 8,000 farms participate or have participated in the program and more than 31 million dollars in state funds have been allocated to the New York State's Agricultural Nonpoint Source Abatement and Control Program (ANSCAP) since 1994.

One of AEM's strong points is the number of different funding sources that are available to the program. First and foremost is the state's ANSCAP funding source. ANSCAP is supplemented by both the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) and Governor Pataki's 1996 Clean Water/ Clean Air Bond Act. Under ANSCAP, county soil and water conservation districts can apply for cost share funding for both planning and implementation projects. With this source of funding, matching contributions of the county and/or the agricultural producer are required. Aside from state sources there are federal sources of funding such as Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Reserve Program. The 2002 Farm Bill was a big addition in helping reauthorize and fund these, as well as, other federal programs that can be utilized by New York State's AEM program. State and federal sources are the most common funding sources, but not the only ones. There are a few examples where local public and private sources of funding have been utilized (on a cost share basis) to pay for both AEM planning and implementation. The bottom line is that there are a multitude of funding sources, some continuous and some not, for AEM.

The AEM process is based on a five-step (tiered) approach that involves planning and implementation. Tier 1 is the first step in which agricultural producers fill out a standardized questionnaire that is designed to identify potential and existing farm activities that might have environmental impacts. The Tier 2 requires producers to complete more detailed worksheets in activity areas identified in the Tier 1 questionnaire. The Tier 1 and 2 worksheets not only identify areas of concern on the farm, but they also document agricultural producers stewardship. The third step, Tier 3, is the formulation of a farm plan that addresses the environmental concerns and risks identified in the Tier 2. Tier 4 is the implementation of the farm plan through the use of best management practices (BMP's). The final step (Tier 5) of AEM is the evaluation of the effectiveness of implemented aspects of the plan with regards to environmental impacts and economic viability to the agricultural producer.

In most counties, AEM is implemented by using a multi-agency approach that provides technical, educational and sometimes financial support. More often than not, the primary contact for local AEM efforts are county soil and water conservation districts. In order to understand the needs of the local agricultural community, many counties form either countywide or smaller local watershed agricultural committees/workgroups. These committees often include farmers, as well as, other entities that have a vested interest in the local agricultural community. I have advocated that water systems whose source water has an agricultural land base, should try to get representation of some form on local or county AEM workgroups. One must remember that one of the main functions of AEM is to preserve and improve water quality. This is especially true in the case of drinking water supplies. At the very least, water suppliers should contact their county soil and water conservation district to get information on how agricultural non-point source pollution is being handled in their respective source water area. I hope this article gave some background to those of you who can utilize AEM to work with the agricultural community and help protect your source water. If you want more information on this subject, the New York State Soil and Water Conservation Committee has an informative website that discusses AEM in detail. The website address is:

<http://www.agmrkt.state.ny.us/soilwater/home.html>

If you have any questions regarding the subject of agricultural non-point source pollution or New York State's AEM Program, please do not hesitate to call me at (518) 828-3155 Ext. 23. *This article referenced published information on AEM from the New York State Soil and Water Conservation Committee.*