



Got MAEAP, make hay

BY JEREMY NAGEL

Earning MAEAP verification is an achievement to take pride in, and it's worth crowing some about. It's also somewhat newsworthy, meaning it warrants media attention and informing the greater community – especially in this day and age when agriculture is under increasing scrutiny and consumers are looking for some feel-good reassurance about where their food comes from, who raises it, and how.

Trouble is, like so many other positive events, MAEAP verification isn't as tantalizing to media as racier stories like leaking manure lagoons or undercover video of livestock abuse. Sadly, we don't live in a culture that highly prioritizes applauding those who simply do the right thing. That said, there's still some public relations hay to be made.

Within a month of your verification, MDA distributes a press release announcing it to your local media. Like many press releases, though, these can be a bit on the dry side, and aren't likely to land you on the front page. Another problem is that you don't know exactly when it's going to arrive in the in-box of your local newspaper editor.

A follow-up call is in order. Two or three weeks after you receive notice of your official verification, call your local newspaper editor and ask if they've received yet the press release from MDA announcing your farm's MAEAP verification. If they haven't gotten it yet, that's OK-you've knocked on the door and planted a seed in their head and that's good. You've introduced yourself, offered a very brief description of your farm, and mentioned that your MAEAP verification is kind of a big deal, because it shows that you've invested a lot of time, effort and energy doing everything you can to protect the natural resources and safeguard the environment.

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The Darling family celebrated their MAEAP verification with an event on their farm that attracted U.S. Congressman John Dingell, fifth from left, to their farm.

"Mind if I check back with you again next week, then?" you say. Super.

Once they do receive the release from MDA, it's time to moisten it up and give it some flavor. At the very least, you want to express in your own words why you sought MAEAP verification in the first place: "This was important to me because..." Finish that sentence with messages expressing that you care about the environment-air, water and soil quality-and that you care about raising high-quality commodities, and that you care about the greater community you and your farm are part of.

You can step things up a notch by inviting the editor/reporter/photographer out to your farm for a tour: "Love to have you come out and show you around a bit..." There's really no better way to explain some of the improvements you've made than to show them off in the flesh, face-to-face, so they can see, feel, touch and smell them all firsthand.

There's an even better approach to take – one that'll dramatically improve your chances for media attention and net you huge gains in the community relations department. It'll take some work, though: Host an open house at your farm.

That's right: throw the gates open. Come one, come all.

Despite the effort and planning it takes, this happens more often than you might think, and they're almost always hugely successful. An open house is a great way to both show off your stewardship achievements and to engage, inform and enlighten a wide swath of the greater community who don't have much exposure to real farms. In addition to the obvious farm tour, consider offering a decent meal (pig roast, anyone?) and fun activities for children. This is a good way to make your open house family-friendly, and therefore

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Livestock*A*Syst verification recognized at national meeting

BY AMY CWALINA

"Your hard work makes a difference," announced Josh Appleby, Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) verifier, to Eddie Mackay of Dundonald Farm. Mackay was honored at a recent national meeting of the American Highland Cattle Association, held this year in St. Joseph County, and was recognized for his continued commitment to sound environmental stewardship and in turn, to his community and the livestock industry.

Eddie Mackay owns one of the first farms to be verified in the Livestock System using the Livestock*A*Syst (LAS). Dundonald Farm is also verified in the Farmstead System. The new LAS tool was designed to help small and medium-scale livestock producers evaluate environmental risks in a more practical way. When asked why he pursued the MAEAP verification, Mackay said: "Protecting the environment- I've been trying to do it on my own. Verification just makes it official."

Although Mackay decided to make his environmental efforts official, he first learned about MAEAP after a neighbor complained about his cattle in a nearby stream. However, Mackay turned the complaint around to a positive end result.

"I love the idea that this is a voluntary program," Mackay said. "I hate being told what to do, but I don't mind being nudged."

It's comments like that which made Eddie's farm a pilot for Livestock*A*Syst. "His frank opinions," Appleby said, "were what



On June 17, the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) and the American Highland Cattle Association (AHCA) honored Eddie Mackay of Dundonald Farm in Saint Joseph County for his commitment to the environment and the Highland breed. Pictured in the photos with Eddie are Gordon Wenk, Chief Deputy Director at the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA), right, Josh Appleby (MDA), second from left, Melanie Stoughton, St. Joseph Conservation District Water Stewardship Technician, left, and Abbey Dorr, Cass Conservation District Livestock Specialist, second from right.

helped shape the program." The cooperation between farmers and other partners is the key to success. Pilot farmers like Eddie have expressed that Livestock*A*Syst helped them impartially evaluate their operations and improve their environmental management. "The program works all because the farmers want to make a difference." Appleby said.

Conservation district Water Stewardship Technicians Melanie Stoughton and Abbey Dorr from St. Joseph and Cass Counties worked with Mackay to provide technical assistance, along with MAEAP partners from NRCS and MSU Extension.

The event held at Dundonald Farm was a great opportunity for Eddie to show other farmers from around the country, and even farmers from as far as Chile, the changes he made to be environmentally friendly. For success, a voluntary program like MAEAP must have support from its verified farmers. Word of mouth is a common way that other farmers hear about MAEAP and become interested because their fellow producers have benefitted from the program. MAEAP partners and supporters are excited about the program's continued advancement and are encouraged by the flexibility now available to livestock farmers.

Hay

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boost attendance.

Everything you always wanted to know about putting together a successful open house (but were afraid to ask) can be found in the Michigan Ag Council's farm tour guide: <http://www.michfb.com/education/farmers/tourguide>.

One last thing: As long as you're inviting the whole county over for lunch (don't worry; not everybody's actually coming), it's a good idea to extend some special invitations to your local and state-level officials, especially county commissioners, township supervisors and your state reps and senators. An open house is a great opportunity to give them a crash course on how farming really operates (an education most of them desperately need), and they get a chance to press the flesh a bit.

So yes: Take advantage of the opportunity your MAEAP verification provides you. You've invested a lot into making your farm as green as possible; it's ready for some attention. Don't shy away from your share of the spotlight-positive publicity for agriculture is a valuable, lucrative commodity!

MAEAP Happenings

- Ag Expo: July 20-22
Talk with MAEAP staff at Commercial Tent A
- Agriculture's Conference on the Environment (ACE):
January 27 at the Lansing Center
- MAEAP farms identified in the 2010 Farm Market Directory. Get your copy at www.michiganfarmfun.com or your local Farm Bureau Insurance office.

Why MAEAP? Kevin and Jill Hershberger tell their story

The Hershbergers have been farming for 22 years and currently grow corn, soybeans and hay, as well as raising feeder cattle in Cass County. The Hershberger's are MAEAP verified in both the livestock and farmstead system. This family shares their experience with MAEAP during a short interview.

Why is MAEAP important to you?

The MAEAP program is important to us because it helps farmers take better care of the land for future generations. It also gives farmers a sense of control in a time when a lot of people don't understand many of the practices used by farmers in their operations. By participating in MAEAP, you're telling those people that you are doing everything you can to operate your farm in an environmentally safe way.

What was the biggest challenge you faced going through the MAEAP process?

Actually, going through the MAEAP process was very easy for us mainly because of the people who helped us through it, and also because we were already using a lot of the practices in our operation that MAEAP requires for verification. Probably the biggest hurdle for us was installing the manure storage facility for our cattle.

Would you recommend other farmers participate in MAEAP?

We would highly recommend that others participate in the MAEAP program. MAEAP is a great resource for farmers who would like to make some improvements to their operation and again, to show your community that you are doing what you can to farm with environmentally safe practices. This land is all that we have and we have to do what we can to take care of it and preserve it for the next generation.

Were the on-farm assessments (e.g., Farm*A*Syst) beneficial to you?

The on farm assessments were very helpful to us, from the Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) to the irrigation testing. These assessments give you the insight that you need to make improvements and help your operation run at its greatest efficiency. It is also nice to learn through the assessments that the practices you are using are correct and the most beneficial to the environment.

If you could tell one person about the program what would it be?

The thing that we would tell people about the MAEAP program is to USE IT!!! It is a FREE resource that is beneficial to everyone involved. It only takes a small amount of your time to meet with the program coordinator and draw up a plan to come into compliance with the program requirements. You will learn to get maximum results from your farm while benefiting the environment at the same time, which is something that all farmers need to be concerned about. You might actually have fun getting to know the people you're working with, too!



From left on the Hershberger farm are daughter Arminda, Jill, Kevin, their son Andrew and Jill's parents, Jim and Barb Mesko.

Do you think these programs are a good use of your time?

The programs are definitely a good use of any farmers' time; in the world we live in today, taking care of the environment is becoming a greater issue every day. The little bit of time that you will spend working on these programs will pay off in the end when you have something to show the people around you that you are actively implementing practices to take care of the land and keep your farm "environmentally friendly." Since the time that we began working on MAEAP compliance, we would estimate that we have spent no than 30 hours (over two years) on meetings themselves. This includes meeting with a specialist to create a CNMP, meeting with our coordinator to go over the status of our compliance, meeting with our soil conservation district representative to design and implement a plan for our manure storage facility and finally, meeting with the verifier to confirm our compliance. The record keeping for MAEAP is made very easy by the forms that are available for the records. It only takes a moment to write down a notation about when a certain job on the farm was done, or to document planting/spraying/harvesting dates, etc.

What was the best part going through the program?

By participating in MAEAP we were able to make improvements to our cropping program, build a new manure storage facility which we were in great need of, and we make adjustments to our irrigation system so that it will run more efficiently. But by far, the best part of going through the program was working with and getting to know our program coordinators. They made going through this process (which can be very intimidating once you get a look at all of the paperwork that you have to go through) like a breeze. They were there to help us every step of the way. Whenever we had a question or concern, we could call on them for help. Abbey took time out of her personal schedule to help us on several occasions. This program is a great resource for farmers and we hope that others will take advantage of it as well. We would like to thank the Cass County Soil Conservation District, Abbey Dorr and Alex Bozymowski for making the program available and for all that they have done for us.

Leducs promote environmental stewardship to legislators

BY AMY CWALINA

With the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP), opportunities for education are endless.

Not only is the verification process educational to farmers, but the community becomes aware that farmers are doing everything they can to be environmentally friendly.

Legislative candidates and the public both learned about the importance of agriculture, MDA, and MAEAP at a recent event at Leduc Blueberries, a MAEAP Cropping System-verified farm near Paw Paw. Hosts and farm owners Joe and Chantal Leduc said they wanted to be proactive, not reactive.

"MAEAP makes you aware of being environmentally conscious," Chantal Leduc said. Hosting the event also allowed the Leducs to demonstrate their support for legislative candidates who are interested in agriculture and the programs that support the ag industry.

"The voluntary program," Joe said, "is non-confrontational. With their farm and business focused on family tradition and community, MAEAP allows the community to know that they put thought and effort into their plan. Everyone wants to know what you're doing for the environment and MAEAP is the foundation to that."

At the event, Van Buren County Farm Bureau recognized Sen. Ron Jelinek for his continued support of Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) programs such as MAEAP, Right to Farm, Migrant Labor Housing Inspection and others. Throughout his term, Jelinek



When an on-farm event revolves around MAEAP verification, it can draw crowds, as the event at the Leduc farm proves. The event, which also honored Sen. Ron Jelinek, speaking to the crowd in the photo at right, provides opportunities to educate local citizens about farming and promote support for legislators who work for the betterment of agriculture.



Van Buren County Farm Bureau leaders recognize Senator Jelinek for his consistent support of agriculture and proactive programs including MAEAP. Chantal and Joe Leduc, owners of Leduc Blueberries in Paw Paw and MAEAP Cropping System verified, hosted the event.

has made agriculture a top priority. With potential legislators in the room, Sen. Jelinek informed them how important MDA programs are to such a diverse agricultural state such as Michigan.

Todd Kubiszak, President of the Van Buren County Farm Bureau, said events such as this one are extremely important.

"Van Buren is an agricultural county. MAEAP and other MDA programs allow us to be safe, protected and show people that we are doing what we can to be environmentally safe," he said.

For information about how every farmer can host an on-farm educational event, contact your local MSU Extension office, local conservation district or county Farm Bureau Farmers CARE action team.



MAEAP: advice is always free and confidential

The Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) is overlooked by people who've jumped on the environmental bandwagon, but there's no reason for the world's premier environmental stewards - farmers - not to jump onto MAEAP with both feet.

The effective, voluntary program, which is in danger from budget cuts, provides services for farmers that not only save them potential environmental headaches, but also can save them significant money.

"We often say we provide free environmental consulting, but sometimes our recommendation is that the farmer hire a paid consultant," said Josh Appleby, resource analyst and MAEAP verifier. "But if a farmer has an issue and is unsure if what they have is OK, through MAEAP they can talk to someone without consequence and get good information about what type of consulting they may have to do."

For example, Appleby said, if a farm needs to develop a comprehensive nutrient management plan (CNMP), the verifier will often recommend a paid consultant. On the other hand, preliminary assessment from a MAEAP verifier is free, and helps the farmer know where he stands.

"I may get a call from a farmer who says he's interested in getting MAEAP verified, but is worried about fuel or fertilizer storage, and isn't sure what to do. We can come out and help, and we do it for free," Appleby said. "We'll help them prioritize and understand whether the thing they worried about is a real issue, and if so, how to solve it. And if he has to do something about the point of worry, in some cases we can help the farmer find a way to at least partially pay for it."

Because MAEAP verifiers are trained to know the various sources of financial help, a free visit to evaluate the farm is always a good first step. And remember, there are no governmental mandates that go along with MAEAP involvement.

"MAEAP is an effective environmental protection program be-

cause it works with people who want to protect the environment. It's a way for the farmer to do the right things in ways that don't put them out of business and on a timetable that is feasible with their long-term plans," Appleby said. "We work on the farmers' behalf at their invitation, and we won't turn them in for violations. We'll help them solve it. The whole idea is that if the farmer is doing things right, he can get a confidential meeting that helps him meet state and federal regulations and Right-to-Farm guidelines with the confidence that he's doing things right. And, he can be recognized for it."

So while MAEAP can provide many free services for the farmer, there will come a time, Appleby said, when money will have to be spent.

"Another nice thing about working through MAEAP is that we can identify those potential costs, help plan a budget that works for the individual farm, and sometimes we can help the farmer find the dollars he may need to solve a problem. It doesn't hurt anyone to figure out where they are environmentally, and if they use the MAEAP program, that evaluation is free. Unlike some governmental regulations, we don't just look at one thing. We give the farmer the whole picture of the farm. Without that whole picture, you can find lack of consistency."

So if you want a whole-farm picture call a MAEAP verifier. The advice is free.

Promote your farm, MAEAP with new sticker

MAEAP has stickers for sale that are 1"x1.5" to use on farm products or farm promotional material. The farm must be verified in two systems to use the logo on farm products. The stickers are for sale on the MAEAP web site (<http://www.maeap.org/maeap/incentives/apparel>) for \$5 per 100 stickers.



With support from:



FACTS:

- MAEAP is a cost effective investment for all of Michigan with more than \$360 return for every \$1 of state tax dollars invested.
- To date, nearly 10,000 Michigan farms have started the verification process.
- Michigan businesses have lauded MAEAP as the premier environmental program that impacts not only Michigan's natural resources but also all management decisions on the farm.
- Verified farms prevented enough phosphorus from reaching lakes and streams to grow 118,000,000 pounds of algae in 2009 alone.

Total MAEAP Verification: 798