

Farm conservation dollars and sense

As the result of a new government program, New York City's water authority decided it is more economical to help farmers control phosphorus in water runoff than it is to implement new city water-treatment techniques.

The new Conservation Effects Assessment Program (CEAP) makes sure taxpayers get their money's worth from publicly funded conservation measures. Most of the public funds for agricultural conservation come from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) through the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act, the "Farm Bill."

The Farm Bill used to fund mostly commodity-related programs, but legislators shifted emphasis in 2002 by increasing conservation funding by 80%, compared to the 1996 bill.

That increase intensified demands to ensure conservation funding be used effectively. USDA decided to do a cost-benefit analysis of the conservation practices funded during the past 50 years and report the results to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) — the federal budget overseer — Congress, farmers, ranchers, and environmental policymakers. CEAP is the result, with a goal of putting dollar-and-cent values on the conservation practices' farm and environmental benefits.

The program includes watershed projects — involving farmers; ranchers; and local, state and federal partners — in states from New York to California. Clarence Richardson, director of the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Grassland Soil and Water Research Laboratory in Temple, Texas, coordinates ARS watersheds in the program.

CEAP's Town Brook, N.Y., watershed is a good example. Its nearly 9,150 acres drain into Cannonsville Reservoir, the second-largest reservoir in the Catskill/Delaware reservoir system, which supplies about 94% of New York City's drinking water. Excess phosphorus, probably from dairy manure, stimulates algal blooms that interfere with chlorination. CEAP helped New York City's water authority decide it was economical to help farmers control phosphorus.

CEAP will continue to measure these types of costs and benefits during the next several years, along with improving practices.



Editor's Note: This article was adapted from a release written by Don Comis of the ARS News Service. Read more about ARS research as part of CEAP in the December 2005 issue of Agricultural Research magazine, available online at www.ars.usda.gov/is/AR/archive/dec05/money1.205.htm.