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Water for Agriculture local leadership committees share initial outcomes

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For nearly two years, a diverse group of stakeholders in Potter, Tioga and Mifflin counties have been working on a collaborative effort to address the water and agriculture issues that matter most to them. Their results, and on-going efforts, provide important lessons other counties or regional groups can learn from.

The Water for Agriculture project (Water4Ag), funded by USDA's National Institute for Food and Agriculture, was designed to better understand how to best bring agriculture and communities together to meet water and agricultural challenges in ways that reflect their interests and priorities. Led by Penn State, in partnership with several other universities, the project embarked in early 2019 on a two-year process to bring together diverse stakeholders including local farmers, organizations, and agencies from local communities, scientists and Extension professionals to assist five communities across the country - two in Nebraska, one in Arizona and two in Pennsylvania.

In each of the five-partner communities, we brought together groups of local leaders representing a variety of interests and expertise to participate in a structured engagement and planning process. While the projects and activities that emerged from each community differed, the consistent and structured process of the Water4Ag project allowed each to participate in a facilitated effort to identify critical water issues; share concerns and ideas for meeting the challenges they identified; assess past programs and their achievements; understand what is known and not known about the conditions and characteristics of current challenges; prioritize the most critical issues the watershed or county faces; understand the tools, resources and programs available to help farmers and communities meet their agriculture and water goals; learn from one another; and gather the perspectives of their friends and neighbors in random-sample surveys.

The achievements and lessons learned from the project's two Pennsylvania communities are highlighted. Their experiences speak to the importance of working collaboratively, across diverse interests, to address local water and agricultural concerns.

Mifflin County – Priorities and Experience

The 16-member Local Leadership Committee in Mifflin County is made up farmers and representatives from a local municipality, the Farm Bureau, the Conservation District, NRCS, DEP, Extension, Trout Unlimited, and respected community leaders. About half of the group is farmers representing a range of size and production types.

The group has worked to identify and implement projects to address the challenges they pinpointed in a way that considers enhancing water quality and ensuring a vibrant agricultural economy reflective of farmers' needs and priorities. Committee member and former conservation district manager Dan Dunmire said, "Agricultural producers are currently facing increasing pressure from state and federal agencies to be compliant with water quality regulations and at the same time are enduring one of the worst farm economies in recent

memory. Our goal is to ensure that programs and resources are developed in ways that are responsive to all these concerns."

Goals the group identified include bringing together the farm and non-farm communities, increasing understanding and appreciation of agricultural and water issues in the county, making measurable improvements in water quality, increasing riparian buffer implementation, and increasing the resources and information available to help farmers meet their soil and water conservation goals.

Accomplishments from the Mifflin County committee include developing fact sheets on cover cropping and double cropping to reflect data relevant to Mifflin county, creating a web-based story map highlighting the county's water resources, and developing a video – 'Mifflin County's Water Resources: An Introduction'. The group also developed summary fact sheets and conducted presentations highlighting results from the residential and producer surveys. "It's unlikely that any of these projects, and others planned, would have been undertaken by any one agency or organization. They were the direct result of the thoughtful discussions and ideas generated during this process," said Extension Agricultural Engineer, John Tyson and co-facilitator of the effort in Mifflin County.

The group is now contributing its experience and lessons learned to the statewide County Action Planning (CAP) process established to develop a strategy meet the water quality improvement targets established for Pennsylvania. "In addition to the accomplishments the Water for Agriculture group has made over the last couple of years, the efforts and the relationships the group has built will go a long way to helping us ensure the interests and priorities of Mifflin County farmers are front and center in the plans that emerge from this new CAP initiative," noted Trevor Weaver, the District Manager for the Mifflin County Conservation District.

Upper Cowanesque – Priorities and Experience

The Upper Cowanesque & Triple Divide/Potter-Tioga local leadership committee is comprised of 11 representatives of the farming community, interest groups, agencies, and technical service and education providers. "Our goal," explains Sean Rukgaber, local leadership committee member, "was to gather as much information as possible about everyone's ideas and perspectives and how a collaborative approach to addressing water and agricultural issues would be useful."

Committee member Earle Robbins said, "This community group has been working to identify long-term solutions and implementing projects that address the region's most pressing water and agricultural issues." The group has identified four areas of interest: education – one-on-one, peer to peer, and group; farm/community-sponsored events; streambank restoration; and road construction and treatments and their impact on agriculture and local waterways. Despite the interruptions of COVID 19, the local leadership team continues to meet remotely to ensure continued progress on additional workshop educational efforts post-pandemic.

The farmer and residential surveys have provided the group with opportunities to share and discuss the perspectives and priorities of their neighbors with a variety of leaders and organizations while providing the local leadership team with important insights about future priorities.



The group is now focusing on a water sampling project to assess water quantity and quality in 20 stream and river test sites across the region. Funded in part by a small grant from the US Geological Survey, team members will work over the next few months with water testing experts to place testing units and begin collecting water data and share results.

Lessons Learned from Collaborations

Because one of the Water4Agproject's key goals was to better understand how best to develop collaborative strategies that work, local Leadership Committee members were asked to complete a wide range of evaluations and assessments. "The information we gathered and the perspectives they shared provide a number of important insights that other local collaboration efforts can learn from," said Walt Whitmer, Extension Sr. Extension Associate and Engagement Coordinator for the project. "In the coming year we intend to develop workshops and web-based and printed informational guidebook to ensure other communities can benefit from this work," Whitmer noted.

While the project is on-going, some of the most important lessons to emerge so far include:

- Recognizing that everyone has valuable expertise and perspective to contribute, and building relationships is critical to successful collaborative efforts.
- The collaborative nature of bringing different perspectives to the table can provide important opportunities to identify ideas and develop solutions that no individual or organization could achieve on its own
- Considerable majorities of both residents and farmers believe that preserving or enhancing water quality is important to an area's quality of life
- Structured and well-facilitated processes can be useful in allowing communities and groups to efficiently focus on what matters most – creating solutions to the issues they have identified
- Taking the time for deliberative and in-depth discussions and looking at an issue from multiple perspectives are important ingredients in learning from one another and creating long-term and successful strategies to address the issues that matter most to communities

For more information visit <https://water4ag.psu.edu/> or contact Walt Whitmer, wew2@psu.edu, (814) 865-0468.

Online resources

Department of Animal Science: animalscience.psu.edu

College of Agricultural Sciences: agsci.psu.edu

Cooperative Extension: extension.psu.edu

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