



Earth Day, Every Day

4/21/2012

By Margaret Gates Regional Editor

Tomorrow is Earth Day.

More than 1 billion people around the globe, from every background and nationality, will unite to celebrate our planet and urge individuals and governments to protect it.

The movement was launched 42 years ago by Gaylord Nelson, a U.S. senator from Wisconsin who thought a teach-in on the environment would put environmental protection on the national agenda.

In the four decades since that first observance, our country has made great strides in that direction, and for that we should, in part, thank the original caretakers of the earth — farmers.

For some, environmental consciousness is a once-a-year event — perhaps an April 22 rally on the National Mall or a community cleanup or an urban gardening project.

These activities are wonderful reminders of the importance of caring for our natural resources. And we hope they inspire at least some participants to incorporate that Earth Day mindset into daily living.

For farmers, however, Earth Day has always been a way of life, 365 days a year, long before it became politically fashionable.

Caring for the environment is something farmers do as a matter of routine. And the agriculture industry encourages such practices with a host of awards.

For example, Blue Spruce Farm in Bridport, Vt., was recognized recently with the Elanco Award for Dairy Farm Sustainability for its use of energy-saving technology, such as an anaerobic digester and variable speed vacuum pump control. The farm also uses draglines for manure injection to reduce runoff from its 3,000 acres.

Also this year, Flintrock Farms in Lititz, Pa., and Pine Draft Farm in Augusta, W.Va., received the Family Farm Environmental Excellence Award from the U.S. Poultry & Egg Association.

Flintrock owners Daniel and Jen Heller have an extensive stormwater management system, recycle horse manure, use in-house compost windrows for poultry litter and employ a 200-kilowatt system of solar panels.

The Hellers donated their \$1,000 award to the Lancaster County Conservation District and the Lancaster County Agriculture Council because of the work those organizations do to promote good stewardship of natural resources.

Pine Draft owners Brian and Kelli Englinger built their poultry, manure and composting facilities with grassy banks and ditches that spread out into wooded or grassy areas to buffer any possible runoff. They've also placed their farm in a permanent conservation easement.

At the time of the award announcement, West Virginia Agriculture Commissioner Gus R. Douglass said, “This award should go a long way in diminishing criticism aimed at farmers who are working every day to protect the environment they rely upon to make a living.”

Yes, it should. But we all know there are many out there who not only blame farmers for environmental woes, but also take great pains to target farms as a way to further their causes.

Would it matter to them that, over the past 30 years, farmers have reduced runoff due to wind and water by nearly 30 percent?

Or that they’ve enrolled a total of 31 million acres in the Conservation Reserve Program to protect the environment and provide habitat for wildlife?

Or that they’ve installed more than 2 million miles of conservation buffers?

Or that they’ve increased conservation tillage from 17 percent in 1982 to 63 percent today?

It is no coincidence that many Earth Day celebrations across the country will include farmers markets and trips to local farms — recognition that a sustainable future starts with farmers.

Let’s hope that all individuals — both public and private — learn to carry that knowledge with them 365 days a year.

And to all farmers, Happy Earth Day.