

Frequently Asked Questions

MAEAP 2011

What is the goal?

A 500% increase in farms verified in MAEAP by 2015, representing 80% of Michigan's agricultural production. Growing Michigan's \$71 billion Food and Agriculture Industry depends on regulatory certainty and policies that enhance access to local, domestic and international markets. The Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program or MAEAP is a key to the sustainable growth of Michigan's 2nd largest industry.

What is MAEAP?

MAEAP is the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program. It is a proactive, voluntary program created to help all farmers to address environmental risks on farms with the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) handling 3rd party verification. Today, MAEAP is a partnership of over 50 state, federal, academic, agriculture, conservation and private partners that are driven to facilitate the successful achievement of MAEAP verification on farms.

Why was MAEAP started?

In 1997, MDA and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) signed the Pollution Prevention Strategy for Michigan Agriculture which called for creation of an Industry-led Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program. In 1999, agricultural groups worked in partnership with state, federal, academic and conservation partners to create MAEAP with bylaws and program goals. The partnership was formalized in 2000 with the signing of a partnership agreement.

What is the role of the MAEAP partners?

The primary role of the partners is communication. The partners commit to communicating with each other to ensure MAEAP stays on the right track as a voluntary, proactive program designed to help farmers comply with environmental law, rules and regulations. We need to communicate with each other so we can all "say the same things" when we are working with farmers. MAEAP uses partner led committees to develop communication tools, to evaluate the program's effectiveness, to develop incentives and to develop the standards necessary for verification. Partners also commit to promoting farmer involvement in the program.

How does MAEAP work?

MAEAP has 3 phases; education, on-farm assessment & verification. To become MAEAP verified, a farmer must complete educational requirements which are available annually in local meetings and are now available on the web at www.maeap.org. Second, a farmer must complete an environmental risk assessment that fits their farm. Today, MAEAP offers risk assessments for the following farming systems; livestock, farmstead, cropping, greenhouse and

orchards. Once a farmer understands the environmental risks on the farm, the farmer spends time and resources to address the risks. When all of the risks are addressed for their specific “system” through conservation practices, planning and management, the farmer can voluntarily call MDA to ask for “verification”. MDA then meets with the farmer, reviews their risk assessments, plans, management & practices. If the farmer has successfully addressed the environmental risks on the farm, the farm is then MAEAP verified and a farmer can purchase a MAEAP verification sign for his/her farm.

What kinds of risks are addressed by MAEAP?

A farm’s environmental risk depends on the farming operation. If a farm has livestock, the farm may focus on manure management; storage, handling and land application. A crop grower may specifically focus on managing nutrients and pesticides in the field. On the farmstead, risks may include pesticide storage, fuel storage, wellhead protection, storm water management, emergency planning and spill prevention around the farm. Depending on the farm, a farm may be MAEAP verified in multiple systems. Today, over 200 MAEAP verified farms are verified in multiple systems. Regardless of the system, every farm field has “prescriptions” for the conservation, nutrients and management based on highly accurate soil tests.

Why do farmers participate in MAEAP?

Because it is voluntary. As independent, innovative businessmen and businesswomen, farmers see MAEAP as a means to address environmental risks on their own terms using sound science with partners like MDA that they trust. As far as motivation, some farmers simply see it as the right thing to do so they make the investment. MAEAP allows farmers to be proactive and proud of their environmental stewardship. Some farmers see significant savings in pesticide and nutrient management costs through adoption of technology and increased soil sampling. Some farmers add value to their products by using MAEAP verification to show customers how they care for the environment. Some large livestock farms were formally allowed to be MAEAP verified instead of getting a permit from 2002 – 2007. Under current state regulations, this is no longer an option.

Who helps a farmer to become MAEAP verified?

In truth, all of the partners have a role. Partners positively promote the program to farmers and urge their involvement. Conservation District technicians as well as field staff of the various partners work with producers to complete risk assessments. The USDA – Natural Resources Conservation Service provides technical and financial assistance to farmers for conservation practices, planning and management. MDA employed “MAEAP verifiers” finish things up by working with farmers to achieve verification.

What kinds of incentives are there for farmers to be MAEAP verified?

Today, there are limited incentives to encourage farmers to achieve MAEAP verification. Incentives include letters of congratulations from partnering organizations, rebates on verification signs, reduced insurance rates for farm policies and increased consideration for Farm Bill programs through USDA – NRCS. At one time, MDA offered small financial incentives of \$500 per MAEAP system. Because of the current economy, these are no longer offered.

How have farmers participated in the program?

Some farmers adopted the program quickly. Partners worked with these innovators early to develop the program through “on-the-farm” training. Several of these farmers directly participate in the program committees. As of 2011, over 10,000 farmers have completed “Phase I” education requirements and are on the path to MAEAP verification. Many of these farmers are working with technicians today to address risks and implement conservation practices. Since 2002 when verification was first offered, there are over 860 verifications on farms today. Nearly 1,000 farmers are MAEAP verified or have asked for MAEAP verification. Partners are often told by participating farmers that MAEAP has influenced the future generations of Michigan farmers through education and the examples set by participating farmers.

How much does it cost for a farmer to become MAEAP verified?

The farm-specific costs of MAEAP vary like the conservation needs of a farm. A 2005 peer reviewed evaluation performed at Michigan State University estimated the average livestock producer spent \$104,423 in total or \$14,709 annually on capital investments and managerial changes to maintain MAEAP verification. For the other systems, average costs of \$25,000 per farm are anecdotal as some spend much more, some spend less.

How does MAEAP work for CAFOs?

To start, a CAFO is a Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation defined in the Clean Water Act as a point source of pollution. Large CAFOs are livestock farms that have, for example, over 700 mature dairy cows, 2,500 hogs or 1,000 head of beef cattle. Michigan has over 200 livestock farms of this size, the overwhelming majority of which are family owned and operated. In accordance with Michigan rules, a CAFO can be large, medium or small in size depending on their farm specific conditions and management. In 2002, large Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) were allowed to complete MAEAP instead of applying for a discharge permit if they had not had a discharge of pollutants from their farm. This option was made possible through a formal “Innovation Agreement” between DEQ and the US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA). This was the only agreement of its type in the country. Of the nearly 200 large CAFOs, over 140 of them chose MAEAP as they had not had a regulated discharge. Today, Michigan requires all large CAFOs to obtain coverage under a discharge

permit, regardless of discharge history. Many large CAFOs decided to let their MAEAP verification lapse as they have a permit and see little value from the program. Although comparisons between MAEAP and permits continue, a large CAFO can be MAEAP verified and permitted.

What are some of the benefits of the program?

Beyond farmer pride in environmental stewardship, below are some of the environmental benefits of MAEAP through 2011:

- Over \$1,200,000 is spent for practice implementation by farmers working toward MAEAP verification every year.
- MDA has verified that responsible manure application and other conservation practices are the rule on over 317,200 acres of Michigan farmland.
- Over 142,000 tons of farming soil where it belongs: in farm fields...EACH YEAR. That's 12,668 – 10 yard dump trucks of soil not reaching streams and lakes – every year.
- Phosphorus loading through sedimentation was reduced by 1.4 million pounds with annual phosphorus reduction near 260,000 pounds ...enough to grow 7,500 TONS of algae in lakes and streams.
- Over 200,000 acres receiving pesticides have approved pest management plans.
- Almost 4,300 acres of filter strips have been installed and almost 1,000 gullies have been stabilized, improving water quality.

How does MAEAP compare to like programs in other states?

MAEAP is the most comprehensive program of its type in the country. Like programs exist in Florida, Louisiana and California for example, but they are limited in that some are specific to a type of farming (e.g. Dairy in California) or do not incorporate the technical standards or 3rd party verification like MAEAP. MAEAP was recognized by the White House in 2005 as one of the top cooperative conservation programs in the country.

What are some of the roadblocks?

The MAEAP partners have worked through their share of “stops” along the way with some of the bigger “stops” being:

- Showing farmers the program's value for the money invested. MAEAP's funding for verification was cut by 44% in 2010 with the potential for more cuts on the way. Limited incentives and questions of the program's viability have not helped farmer participation. Beyond “congratulations” letters and legislative resolutions of support, little value is afforded to farmers for their investment and participation.
- Addressing fuel storage on farms.

- Determining if existing manure storages are functioning properly without destructive testing.
- An interpretation that properly constructed, maintained and managed farming practices represent major sources of contamination requiring 800' setback distances from wells.

To learn more about MAEAP, visit www.maeap.org.