



Farm*A*Syst addresses environmental issues

By Tom Block

Faced with growing pressures from every sector of the population, Iowa farmers will be better served by taking a leading role in environmental protection, according to a consensus of Western Iowa farm leaders.

Nearly two dozen people attended a seminar in Manning on Nov. 7 to learn how Iowa Farm*A*Syst, a Farmstead Assessment System funded by a grant from the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), can be used to aid farmers in bringing their land into compliance with state and federal environmental regulations.

Recognizing the importance of the issue, the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation has taken an active role in developing and promoting the Farm*A*Syst (FAS) program in conjunction with Agren, Inc., a Carroll, Iowa-based company that deals exclusively with environmental issues as they relate to agriculture.

"There is no question in my mind that farm assessment is in our future," said Roy Bardole, a Farm Bureau member from Rippey. "Whether it comes because we have embraced it, or because somebody is cramming it down our throats is up to us."

Groundwater

FAS is a voluntary assessment program designed to educate rural residents on farmstead practices that may lead to surface water and groundwater contamination.

Step-by-step worksheets help rural residents understand groundwater pollution risks on their own properties, and program materials assist landowners in locating the

technical resources and financial assistance needed to implement action plans.

The first step in FAS is performing a site assessment to determine any environmental issues that might need to be addressed on a specific farmstead. The assessment can be done by the individual landowner with or without assistance from outside agencies.

Focus areas can include proper management of pesticides, fertilizer, milking center wastewater, household wastewater, open feedlot manure runoff, confinement manure storage, hazardous material storage, petroleum storage, dead animal disposal and well water condition.

On-site evaluation

To illustrate how the program works, Tom and Peg Buman of Agren, Inc., led an on-site farmstead assessment on the farm of Duane Karsten located northwest of Manning.

Three issues discussed during the tour were well water condition and maintenance, household wastewater management and open feedlot manure management.

The type, age and location of wells on a particular farm are three factors that primarily influence water condition. Wells dug before 1940 carry a high risk, as do those that are located in low areas where surface water runoff is a potential cause of pollution.

Tom Gach of the Carroll County environmental health department noted that governmental regulations don't distinguish between water quality standards for humans versus livestock.

For that reason, even if a farm household is connected to a rural water system, contamination of

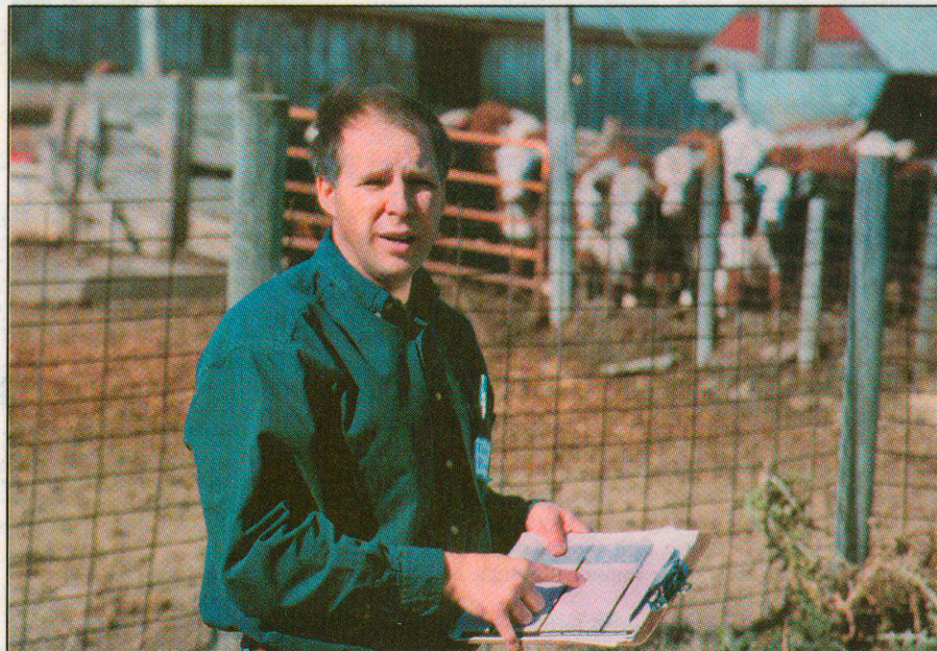


PHOTO BY TOM BLOCK

Tom Buman of Agren, Inc. goes over a checklist from Farm*A*Syst literature discussing potential groundwater pollution risks from open feedlots during a seminar with agriculture leaders from Western Iowa on Nov. 7 near Manning.

well water is still a primary concern addressed by FAS. Abandoned wells that have not been properly plugged are another common violation of Iowa code present on many farmsteads.

Gach also discussed proper installation of household septic systems, which are required to be located a minimum distance from water wells and ponds or lakes.

Many counties have grant or low-interest loan programs in place to help farmers address problems with abandoned wells and septic tanks, Gach noted.

In the area of open feedlot

manure management, FAS provides a checklist for livestock producers to follow in designing their feedlots.

Tom Buman noted the importance of diverting water, such as rainwater, around feedlots to lower the volume flowing into sediment basins.

Changing perceptions

Many farmers are already participating in environmentally sound management practices, although public perception might indicate otherwise. Bardole noted that a boom in the organic food market is likely a result of that

misperception.

A number of funding provisions in the farm bill proposed by Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin are also tied to environmental protection issues, Bardole added.

"Environmental assessment is a must," he emphasized. "We can postpone it, but eventually we have to do it. If we want to stay productive, we better lead the movement and not follow it."

Farmers interested in learning more about Farm*A*Syst can contact Agren, Inc., at 712-792-6248 or their county Farm Bureau office.