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FARMING WITH FARMLAND PROTECTION

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Perhaps the main thrust of what I want to convey today, would be "How Farmland Preservation Program dollars have benefitted my Farm operation.

Let us examine what constitutes and is considered a "young" farmer!? I believe that I read somewhere that the average age of a farmer on the Eastern Shore is about 66 years old. Contrary to appearances and the way I sometimes feel, I am relatively young in the business.

Farming has become virtually out of reach for a young person, say 20 to 30 years old. The reason for this is that farming has changed from a labor intensive operation to a capital and cost management operation. Start-up costs have become exorbitant due to two (2) major factors:

1. The capital cost of land.
2. The capital cost of the necessary farm equipment.

The equipment cost can be mitigated through shopping used equipment and or leased equipment. On the other hand land values continue to spiral upwards (in our area) primarily due the intangible added value as a result of development potential.

However this trend can be offset, by enrolling land in the Farmland Preservation Program. This program provides the farmer with up front State Agricultural funds in exchange for the farmer agreeing to retain the land for agricultural use only. Effectively the farmer has the advantage of immediate funding and simultaneously have retention of full ownership of the land. As an added benefit, by eliminating the farms' development potential the land becomes less expensive and more affordable for young farmer wishing to start-up or expand.

Farmland Preservation also acts as an environmental investment. With the pressures of attempting to service debt and produce a profit leave people such as myself with no alternative, except to double crop. Another very important consideration is the importance of planning my crops and utilizing the best forecasts available, such as:

1. Crop sale price forecasts.
2. Cost per acre tillage estimates.
3. Fertilization costs.

Crop sale prices and crop costs per acre are relatively easy numbers to project and develop. On the other hand fertilization costs have a variable that is, or can be very costly to the farmer, in addition to being harmful to the environment.

Put yourself in my shoes for a moment. When I plan my crops, should I plan for fertilizing for a good seasonable growing season yield? Or should I instead plan on a drought type yield? Of course you want to plan on a seasonable yield, but what if you experience drought? One key that I have found for successful farming is the intensive utilization of liquid nutrients. The application of liquid

nutrients is simple and easy to control. The plants rapidly absorb these nutrients and mature to their maximum potential.

We have now experienced two years in a row of drought during our major crop season. If the plants did not utilize the full potential of liquid fertilizers, what happened to the balance?

Because of the sandy soil on the Eastern Shore, a portion of these nutrients reach our ground water table. A portion of the contaminants which is reaching our water table must be attributed to the advent of double cropping, hence double fertilization! As this cycle continues, how long will it be before our good water sources become non-potable?

With two years of drought behind me, I wonder how many pounds of nutrients even from my small operation have found their way into the ground water.

Just think for a minute. Nitrates in ground water may be consumed by a milk cow. The natural process of a cow does not remove nitrates from its' milk. This same milk goes to schools as nourishment for our children. Nitrates tend to "rob" oxygen from your bloodstream and make you lethargic. Did you ever hear anyone say, "kids don't play like they used to. All they want to do is sit around". I wonder of the unused nutrients such as nitrates could be a part of this problem?

In addition to croppage, I also raise chickens. Chickens create litter and litter creates odors. There is no such thing as a 100% odorless chicken farming operation. If someone next to an agricultural preservation area is going to spend a considerable sum for a home, they need to be advised beforehand of this fact. They also need to be informed that the farmer has certain rights and protection under the Farmland Preservation Program, to continue his operation.

The cost of having to defend an odor complaint in court, could easily run into thousands of dollars. These funds come directly out of the farmers' pocket with absolutely no offsetting benefit! On the other hand we realize that someone who has spent many tens of thousands of dollars for a home, has a right to fully enjoy their lifestyle.

The new home-owner needs to be advised with full disclosure beforehand, in order to minimize friction between the homeowner and the farmer.

As for my operation, the injection of Farmland Preservation Dollars has meant that the way of life that I knew as a child will now be perpetuated. That the land which my father inherited from my grandfather and that I inherited from my father, will be able to remain a farm so that I can continue to be a contributing member to our agricultural community and the greater community of society and the environment.