

Environmental changes benefit farms

By **BOB MONTGOMERY**
Staff Writer

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GROWING GREEN

Tree huggers they're not, but farmers care just as much about a clean environment as anyone else. After all, clean water and soil are key to their livelihood.

And while regulation — the dreaded "R" word on Wall Street — might be seen as big government intrusion to some, it has meant technological advances in the world of agriculture that have produced better yields and a cleaner environment.

When new laws are passed, it is ultimately up to farmers to make sure they are followed.

Art Latham, a spokesman with the N.C. Cooperative Extension, said his agency helps interpret new regulations and then gives farmers tools — such as workshops and demonstrations — to implement them.

"Regulation is the driver," Extension watershed specialist Mitch Woodward of Wake County told Latham in a 2009 article. "Our education programs have been very well received by com-

Many environmental factors have affected farming in the past 25 years. Besides improvements to water quality under the Clean Water Act, there have been regulatory changes to protect wetlands. Also, timbering operations have improved to lessen erosion and sedimentation and protect farmland.

STATEWIDE TOP 5 REGULATORY CHANGES AFFECTING AGRICULTURE IN THE PAST 25 YEARS

1. Food safety legislation
2. Regulation of large livestock and poultry farms under the Clean Water Act
3. Regulation of water quality
4. National organic standards
5. Subsidies for bio-energy production

SOURCE: Ted Feitshans, N.C. Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics

LOCAL TOP 5 REGULATORY CHANGES AFFECTING AGRICULTURE IN THE PAST 25 YEARS

1. Swine lagoon management
2. Wetlands designation
3. Farm nutrient management
4. Land clearing
5. Pesticide application and record-keeping

SOURCE: Lewis Smith, N.C. Cooperative Extension Service director, Perquimans County

STAFF GRAPHIC BY MICHAEL HUNLEY

munities across our state because they address the regulatory programs."

One major program that has been constantly evolving is the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's 1972 Clean Water Act.

In order for communities to obtain their National Pollution Discharge Elimination System permit to discharge untreated, polluting stormwater into streams, communities must submit engineered stormwater

"best management plans" that show how they plan to remove pollutants in runoff from urban areas.

Phase 1 of the two-phased stormwater program regulated runoff from North Carolina's largest cities and construction sites that disturb five or more acres, according to Latham.

Phase 2, begun in 1999 and still under way, begins to regulate small towns and construction sites that disturb an area as small as

one acre. Statewide, that affects more than 150 smaller communities, Latham stated.

Runoff can be an environmental problem when it collects pollutants while crossing farmland and impervious areas such as streets and roads and parking lots before entering waterways. EPA's goal is to reduce stream erosion and pollution and improve water quality. Runoff can include chemicals, metals

and bacteria from fertilizers, wildlife and animal waste and cars and industries.

Besides regulation, farmers are using better computer technology and laboratory science to improve their farming methods and production.

For example, many crop sprayers are now equipped with GPS systems that monitor the sprayer's swaths to prevent overlap of pesticides, according to Lewis Smith, interim Extension director for Pasquotank County and the director for Perquimans County.

"This saves the grower money on chemicals and time, and reduces the amount of chemicals released into the environment," Smith said.

Improvements have also been made in genetically modified crops, Smith said.

"Today, a farmer can buy seed from an insecticide on the seed coat to counteract injury from a soilborne insect," he said. "At the same time, that very seed has been genetically modified to be tolerant to a specific herbicide and carries and insectical gene that will kill a specific insect that

feeds on the foliage or roots while not harming beneficial insects."

There is a tradeoff. Seeds can cost eight times as much as they did 25 years ago, he said.

"But the benefits are huge," he said. "The average farmer now feeds 155 people. Twenty or so years ago, that number was one-half or less."

And the environment is better off as well, he added.

"The volume of pesticides being released into the environment as a result of new technology is minute compared to what we may have seen 20, 30 or 50 years ago. Everyone likes that."

The bottom line, Lewis said, is that changes in farming the past quarter century due to regulation and innovation have been beneficial — to both the bottom line, and the environment.

"As a rule, farmers are the last people that want to destroy the environment because their livelihoods depend on it," he said. "As consumers, we all like the benefits of what modern agriculture has to offer."

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Ag agents' duties evolve over time

By **CATHY WILSON**
The Perquimans Weekly

For veteran North Carolina Extension Agent Lewis Smith, the last 25 years has been a blur of changes.

From learning new crops to learning new technology, Smith and the rest of the Extension employees have adapted with the times.

"It used to be if I needed to make a phone call, I'd have to wait until I got to

a farm with a farm shop nearby that had a phone in it," said Smith, director of the Perquimans County Extension Service. "With the introduction of cell phones, I am more readily accessible these days."

The latest information on products, crops, or equipment is now more readily accessible as well, thanks to the internet, websites, and email, he added. What once took weeks to receive by snail mail is now available with the click of a computer key. As a result, more service provided by Extension programs are often conducted in the office rather than out in the fields as in days gone by.

"That's because of economic reasons and because of the advancement of technology," Smith said.

"It used to be that we could travel up to 1,000 miles a month," he said. "The state has become more

"Years ago, there might have been some waste, but at today's prices farmers can't afford that any more."

Lewis Smith
Perquimans Extension agent

For example, Smith says peanuts were the big cash crop 25 years ago. Local acreage rose as high as 4,700 during its heyday causing Extension agents to be knowledgeable of that crop and products involved in that process.

Because of the price now, peanut acreage has fallen to 1,000-1,200 acres, Smith noted.

"The older farmers would have thought peanuts were here to stay," he said.

By comparison, cotton was "just coming into its own" with very few producers in 1986.

"Last year, there were over 12,000 acres planted," Smith said.

A cotton gin is operational in Winfall now, and chemicals used to treat the crop have changed throughout the years.

"That's why this job is so enjoyable," grinned Smith. "We have to learn the products as they change with the crops. There's a different problem that crops up every day. That's what makes this job so exciting. We learn something new every day."

Smith says modern producers want more information on technology, on business issues, and information to help them make better choices to become more cost effective in farming.

"Years ago, there might have been some waste, but at today's prices, farmers can't afford that any more,"

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