Environmental changes benefit farms

TOP 5 REGULATORY CHANGES

1. Swine lagoon management

3. Farm nutrient management

SOURCE: Lewis Smith, N.C. Cooperative Extension

5. Pesticide application and

AFFECTING AGRICULTURE IN THE PAST 25 YEARS

2. Wetlands designation

Service director, Perquimans County

4. Land clearing

record-keeping

By BOB MONTGOMERY Staff Writer

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-

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GROWING GREEN Many environmental factors have affected farming in the past 25 years. Besides improvements to water quality under the Clear Water Act, there have been regulatory changes to

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tation and protect farmland.

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

regulatory programs."

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

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

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munities across our state "best management plans" because they address the that show how they plan to remove pollutants in runoff from urban areas. Phase 1 of the two-phased stormwater program regunmental Protection Agen- lated runoff from North Carolina's largest cities and construction sites that disturb five or more acres,

protect wetlands. Also, timbering operations have improved to lessen erosion and sedimen-

LOCAL

Phase 2, begun in 1999 to regulate small towns and construction sites that disturb an area as small as include chemicals, metals

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

STAFF GRAPHIC BY MICHAEL HUNLEY

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

and bacteria from fertil- feeds on the foliage or roots izers, wildlife and animal waste and cars and industries.

ers 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

while not harming beneficial insects.'

There is a tradeoff. Seeds Besides regulation, farm- 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 onehalf 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."

according to Latham.

Ag agents' duties evolve over time

By CATHY WILSON The Perquimans Weekly

For veteran North Caro-

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

"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

frugal with travel now." Changes in the type of grown now Extension agents on their toes, from learning new growing tips to being edu-"It used to be that we cated on the different types could travel up to 1,000 of chemicals used in the growth and production process.

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 opera-



nomic reasons and because of the advancement of technology," Smith said.

miles a month," he said. "The state has become more

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tional 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 dif-ferent 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 farm-

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

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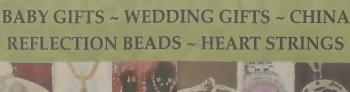
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