

Farm Stewardship Certification and Assessment Program (FSCAP) Annual Report - 2016

The Farm Stewardship Certification and Assessment Program (FSCAP) provides recognition to farmers who have met an agricultural conservation certification standard. Over the last calendar year, the following activities have taken place as of December 10, 2016:

- In 2016, FSCAP Agricultural Specialists and Soil Conservation District (SCD) planners have conducted 24 reviews on 28 farms and certified 21 agricultural conservation stewards protecting 20,709 acres in 12 counties. Since 2010, the project has conducted 196 reviews on 174 farms and certifying 141 agricultural conservation stewards protecting 52,816.33 acres in 22 of Maryland's 23 counties. Of the 141 certified stewards, 31 were certified on the second review. MDA removes all certified farms from the routine nutrient management inspection list for three years.
- One primary form of recognition is the provision of a permanent 30x24 double sided sign, an eight foot painted signpost of 4"x4" stock and MASCD arranges for an installer to place the sign in a prominent location as directed by the steward. Stewards can order extra signs at their own expense; consequently, in addition to the 141 signs provided by the project, stewards have purchased 59 additional signs for a total of 200 farm signs displayed. This indicates that most stewards value their certification as not only a recognition of their accomplishments in conservation, but something that is also good for business.
- The other primary form of recognition is a full page for each steward that describes their farming operation and several photos on a dedicated FSCAP webpage that can include a link to the farm's webpage (if one exists). The FSCAP webpage is at http://mascd.net/FSCAP/farm_list.html.
- Twenty-two stewards have had baseline assessments conducted with MDA software that determines an individual farm's compliance with the regional Total Maximum Daily Load Plan (TMDL) and eligibility to participate in MDA's Nutrient Trading Program and the new Agricultural Certainty Program. Two stewards have upgraded to more efficient energy systems by participating in the Farm Energy Efficiency Audit Program.
- FSCAP reviews were conducted for the first time in Harford County in 2016. To date, 22 of 23 counties have FSCAP activity.
- Since 2012, new partnerships were added with the Maryland Grazers Network (MGN), the Maryland Horse Council (MHC) and the Delmarva Poultry Industry, Inc. which has resulted in the certification of five MGN mentors, 28 horse farms and 23 poultry operations. Other operations include: 52 crops, 25 hay, 5 orchards, 11 vegetable, 3 Christmas tree, 1 nursery, 2 vineyards, 36 beef, 14 dairy, 5 sheep, 3 swine, 1 goat, 1 bison, 1 llama and 2 agri-tourism operations.

Meeting Objectives

The response from soil conservation districts, FSCAP candidates and core partners (MFB, CBF, MDA and NRCS) has been positive in regards to progress made and recognition provided. Of the 176 farms visited so far, the feedback from all the candidates is that they felt the evaluation process was positive and informative. Most of those who have not yet been certified due to minor issues with their nutrient management plans, have indicated that they will make

corrections. Taking the extra step of providing attractive, sturdy signposts and an installer to install the FSCAP sign has attracted interest from neighbors, resulting in some cases with new candidates.

As the project has progressed, we have found the responses to be as we had planned: conservation farmers are willing to be evaluated; those who fall short of the certification standard are willing to make necessary improvements; and consequently, positive recognition and additional conservation efforts have been achieved in a voluntary program. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, based on our preliminary success, had provided a total of \$25,000 over two years and paid for a grant writer that was successful in getting a 2012 grant for FSCAP from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). MDA has indicated that a FSCAP certification equals an official MDA nutrient management inspection and certified stewards are removed from the inspection list for three years. Soil conservation districts perceive that FSCAP reinforces the conservation message they have promoted for decades and becomes a positive, voluntary incentive tool in direct assistance to their workplans.

Public recognition has been provided in a variety of ways. The farm signs display the farm name of the conservation steward, the names and logos of the core partners, the funding partners and the local soil conservation district. MG PUB's logo is on every farm sign and is mentioned in every presentation to conservation groups. Many of the certified stewards have purchased signs in addition to the 30" X 24" sign provided by FSCAP. So far, stewards have purchased 59 additional signs for a total of 200 signs, especially those who deal directly with the public.

Including the dedicated FSCAP webpage provides another primary form of recognition. Each steward gets a full page with a description of the operation and up to three photos. If the farm has a webpage, then a link is included, providing additional exposure and publicity.

The major barrier to progress is working within the windows of opportunity for both farmers and soil conservation districts. We rely primarily on the SCDs to identify and make initial contact with the farmers they have been working with who are most likely to meet the certification standard. SCDs have limited resources and are focused on high priority work assigned by their board and the Maryland Department of Agriculture. Farmers of course are generally not available during planting, harvesting or other critical phases in their operations. The challenge is to focus on time periods when both farmers and SCDs are not preoccupied with higher priorities. Our partnerships with the Maryland Grazers Network, Delmarva Poultry Industry, Inc. and the Maryland Horse Council provides new avenues for finding good candidates and 56 stewards were found through these partners.

MASCD also rewards stewards by giving them preference in other conservation projects. Since 2013, grants for four projects to establish pollinator habitat sites were offered first to stewards for a limited period of time before offering remaining allocations to the rest of the agriculture community. Those four projects established 61 acres of pollinator habitat sites on 67 farms, two agricultural centers, one school and one environmental education center in 15 counties. Twenty four stewards got first choice and five new stewards were discovered by first participating in the pollinator habitat project.

Next Steps

Over the next year, FSCAP goals include conducting 70 certification reviews and to establish a FSCAP presence for the first time in the remaining four soil conservation districts across the state.