

# Partnerships for Livestock Environmental Management Systems

## Livestock EMS Evaluation Synopsis

This evaluation is investigating the merits of each state's approach to educating beef, dairy, and poultry producers about the process of developing and implementing Environmental Management Systems on their operations. To accomplish this, the evaluation collects information about producers' management practices, and their perceptions of barriers and opportunities in the EMS process. The evaluation further collects information from policy makers, interest groups and project team members regarding their interactions with the EMS project. Data are being collected through online and paper surveys of producers, stakeholders, and project team members, and administered over time to track change. In addition, the evaluation will include interviews and document reviews to produce a robust understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each state's approach.

### Highlights

Significant proportions of the participating operators use outside consultants in managing their operations. Most frequently used were State Cooperative Extension Services (64%); followed closely by federal or state conservation agencies (e.g., NRCS, SWCD, FSA, etc., 60%); neighbors or other local producers (48%); producer organizations or commodity groups (37%); hired consultants (29%); and university researchers (25%). All sources were seen as roughly equally helpful.

About 43% of the participants reported not having a written management plan addressing their livestock, crops, finances, or environment. For managing livestock, crops, and business aspects of the operation, producers with written management plans were very likely to consult them for ongoing management (between 95% and 100% of those who had plans in these areas consulted them). Only 82% of those who had written plans for managing the environment consulted those plans. Many more producers

### Do Producers Need EMS?

When asked to report their confidence that their current level of expertise met their operation's needs, producers were fairly evenly confident in the areas of livestock, crop, and financial management. They reported being significantly less confident, however, in the area of environmental management.

reported keeping *written records* (not a management plan) for these areas, though more than twice as many updated their financial and/or livestock records compared to those who updated their environmental records.

Comments on the perceived *strengths* of the pilot tests include:

- Participation in the pilots and adoption of an EMS is voluntary.
- The materials supplied in the pilots are easy to use.
- Content was informative and directly applicable to the circumstances on the operation.
- The materials force critical self-assessment of the operation's environmental performance.
- Delivery methods were efficient, especially where producers had direct contact with EMS trainers.

Comments on the perceived *weaknesses* of the pilot tests include:

- Too much detail can make the tools difficult to use.
- Completing the tools and working on an EMS is time consuming.

- Producers are forced to confront difficult issues regarding poor environmental performance on the operation.
- Some content in the pilot materials does not apply to every operation well.
- The EMS process is “not helpful.”
- Computer delivery of the materials is not helpful.

Users were nearly unanimous in the assertion that the assessment and priority-setting worksheets helped identify the environmental strengths and weaknesses of the operation. The vast majority agreed that the tools are useful for setting priorities and planning changes that may reduce the negative environmental impact of the operation.

Two-thirds of the respondents planned on making changes on their operation due to their participation in the pilot. The remainder was evenly split between those who planned *not* to make any changes and those who were unsure.

Ninety percent of the respondents reported gaining an understanding of EMSs through the project.

- Participants perceived the advantages of EMSs to include: (1) economic benefits, (2) fulfillment of environmental stewardship responsibilities, (3) opportunities for critical self-assessment, (4) improved relations with neighbors, (5) stakeholder satisfaction, (6) improved overall management practices, (7) addressing specific environmental issues faced by the operation, and (8) benefits to livestock.
- Participants perceived the disadvantages of EMSs to include: (1) cost, (2) time invested in managing/amount of work needed, (3) EMSs cannot adequately address some of the environmental issues the operation faces (these issues may be intractable, such as the physical location of a farm at the bottom of a hill, or prevailing wind patterns), and (4)

EMSs force critical self-assessment, which some producers may not wish to do.

Ninety five percent would “probably” or “definitely” recommend EMSs to others (1) as a part of their responsibility for environmental stewardship, (2) because EMS is useful or helpful to agricultural operations, (3) because EMSs may help operations avoid regulation, or (4) because there is no better alternative for reducing the environmental impact of an operation.

Large majorities of participating farmers agreed with these statements:

- Implementation of EMS would significantly reduce negative environmental impacts from livestock operations.
- Environmental management systems aid in improving overall farm management.
- An environmental management system will improve my image with neighbors and other community members.

Roughly two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they intended to make changes to their operation based on their participation in the project.

In order to consider adopting an EMS, producers were most in need of (1) seeing clear economic benefits; (2) cost sharing; (3) tool kits for developing EMSs; (4) reduced regulatory burdens as a result of adopting EMSs; (5) leadership from agricultural organizations; and (6) technical support from a government agency or consultant.

The evaluation has and will continue to produce findings that can be incorporated into similar outreach efforts in the nine states and beyond. The evaluation has been an ongoing part of the project, with evaluation results being presented to state teams and incorporated into their procedures. Results of the evaluation will be disseminated beyond the project team through journal and other articles, inclusion in newsletters, publication on the Internet, and official project reports.

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*This draft report was prepared for the "Partnerships for Livestock Environmental Management Assessment Systems" project, supported by a USDA-CSREES Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems grant, and by USDA-NRCS, <<http://www.uwex.edu/AgEMS/livestock/>>. 03/04.*