

THE PARTNERSHIP FOR A SUSTAINABLE GEORGIA AND ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP IN GEORGIA AGRICULTURE

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Abstract The Partnership for a Sustainable Georgia's AgTrack Program is a joint effort with the state's Department of Natural Resources Pollution Prevention Assistance Division (P2AD) and University of Georgia's Cooperative Extension Service. Through the AgTrack Program, Georgia's farmers and producers volunteer to create an environmental management system (EMS) and implement conservation practices while being promoted as an environmental leader in the state. The AgTrack Program involves all sectors of Georgia agriculture, including row crops, poultry, dairy, and urban agriculture (nurseries, greenhouses, and turf). This partnership also involves businesses and organizations outside of agriculture which are also in the Partnership for a Sustainable Georgia. The Partnership hopes to lead to an exchange of ideas between agriculture and industry that achieves a common goal of environmental stewardship across the entire state of Georgia.

was created in conjunction with the University of Georgia's Cooperative Extension. Housed in the Department of Bio-logical and Agricultural Engineering, the AgTrack pro-gram works to recruit partners across the state in various areas of agricultural production. The AgTrack also seeks the support of those groups that support Georgia agriculture, such as the state's commodity commissions and interest groups such as the Georgia Farm Bureau. The Ag-Track program is also coordinating with the Governor's Environmental Stewardship Award to promote the sustainable practices of Georgia's farmers and producers.

The means by which P2AD and AgP2 work with groups and producers to implement conservation practices is through the use of an environmental management sys-tem (EMS). An EMS, which is recognized internationally (ISO 140001) as a model of operation and long term planning that emphasizes environmental considerations, follows a "plan, do, check, act" procedure that ensures continual improvement and assurance that environmental goals are being met. The basis of an EMS is the environmental policy statement, which provides the framework for environmental objectives and targets. The environmental assessment which follows allows for observation of what current and future environmental concerns there are on the property. These concerns are prioritized and a plan is set in motion to address those concerns. Later, the practices that were implemented to address those priorities are checked for effectiveness and revised if necessary. This EMS framework is a great way to keep producers continually improving their operations that will lead to improved environmental quality and also hopefully an improvement in efficiency and productivity.

INTRODUCTION

Georgia is blessed with a wide variety of resources that are relatively abundant across the state. These resources support various agricultural and manufacturing sectors across the state. Agriculture and industry do not seem to have much in common; however these groups use the same resources and both can have an environmental impact on those resources. A new initiative is also underway to help these two groups work together to improve the conservation of resources.

GEORGIA'S PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE

In 2004, Georgia's Department of Natural Re-sources created a program through its Pollution Prevention Assistance Division to promote resource conservation and waste reduction in Georgia's state agencies, industries, and businesses. Today, over 160 groups are "partners" in the Partnership for a Sustainable Georgia at the Champion, Bronze, Silver, and Gold levels (www.p2ad.org). These partners work with P2AD staff to implement practices that reduce energy and water use as well as waste production.

In 2006, P2AD created a component of the Partnership that would focus on Georgia's number one economic producer, agriculture. The AgTrack program

GEORGIA'S AGTRACK PARTNERS

There are currently three partners in the Partner-ship for a Sustainable Georgia AgTrack. These include T.O.P. Farms in Jeff Davis County, McCorkle Nurseries in McDuffie County and the Georgia Cotton Commission. T.O.P. Farms, a Silver Level partner, is a family-owned and operated farm that raises broiler chickens and beef cattle and produce soybeans and forages. Vann and

Tabatha Wooten, who run the farm, follow an environmental management system and use record keeping and nutrient management plans to reduce their impacts on the envi-ronment. McCorkle nurseries, a well known name in the green industry, is also a member at the bronze level and is working with specialists at the University to reduce their water use in plant irrigation. Recently, the Georgia Cotton Commission joined the Partnership as a Champion Level member which involves them in the promotion of the Ag-Track Program and also recruiting producers for the pro-gram. Membership in the program is completely volunta-ry and is open to any farm or business in the state.

CONCLUSIONS

Being responsible users of natural resources is important to Georgia's farmers, as their livelihoods are dependent upon the resources they protect. With agriculture being Georgia's largest economic engine, there is a large amount of interest in promoting the conservation practices of those producers. The Partnership for a Sustainable Georgia AgTrack is committed to continuing the promo-tion and implementation of conservation practices and efficient production that sustains Georgia's producers.