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Dan Prochilo

Mar 28, 2014, 1:24 pm

Mar 28, 2014, 1:53 pm

Farmers want state funding for water quality plan

Growers seeking to expand their efforts to reduce pesticides, nitrogen in groundwater



From left to right, August Ruckdeschel of the Suffolk County Department of Economic Development and Planning; Vito Minei, executive director of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County; Karen Rivara, board president of the Long Island Farm Bureau; Suffolk County Legislator and farmer Al Krupski and Joe Gergela, farm bureau executive director, gathered at Schmitt's Family Farm in Melville to support the Bureau's groundwater protection plan.

Photo: **Photo courtesy of the Long Island Farm Bureau**

Long Island farmers, business leaders and trade groups are calling for funding from the state's Environmental Protection Fund to be dedicated to sustaining efforts by the island's growers to keep nitrogen and other pollutants from entering the region's aquifers and waterways.

The Long Island Farm Bureau and other groups convened Tuesday — National Agriculture Day — at Schmitt's Family Farm in Melville to underscore the importance of growers' groundwater protection efforts and the significance of the agricultural industry as an economic engine on Long Island.

"Long Island's agriculturalists are stewards of the land and we feel strongly about the need for comprehensive planning of water quality protection since our livelihoods, and the public's health depend on it," stated Karen Rivara, the bureau's board president and the owner of Aeros Cultured Oysters, a wholesale shellfish company that grows its own oysters, mussels, clams and scallops. "The Long Island Farm Bureau is seeking funding from the state to continue and expand upon scientifically-based methods we've been using for quite some time in addressing Long Island's water quality issue."

For over a decade, Long Island's growers have been working to reduce their usage of nitrogen and pesticide, as part of a partnership with the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County, the Suffolk County Soil & Water Conservation District, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and others, according to Joseph Gergela, executive director of the Long Island Farm Bureau. Among their efforts was a sustainable crop management program, including pest and pesticide management, nutrition management and continuing education.

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S Conduit Ave|W Sunrise Hwy|Sunrise Hwy

BELT PKWY - WELLWOOD AVE

East|East|EasWest|West|W

47 min (Avg 26 MPH)

Meadowbrook Pkwy N

NORTHERN STATE PKWY - SOUTHERN STATE PKWY

North South

5 min (Avg 61 MPH)

SOUTHERN STATE PKWY

CROSS ISLAND PKWY - WANTAGH STATE PKWY

East West

18 min (Avg 38 MPH)

Northern State Pkwy W|Grand Central Pkwy W

GRAND CENTRAL PKWY - SUNNYSIDE BLVD

West|West East

16 min (Avg 59 MPH)

Long Island Expy E

NY-110 - EXIT 71

East West

36 min (Avg 62 MPH)

Long Island Expy E

CROSS ISLAND PKWY - NY-135

East West

18 min (Avg 47 MPH)

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3:00 PM ET

Nitrogen pollution creates harmful algal blooms that decimate shellfish populations, close beaches and pose a serious public health threat to our drinking water supply. Pathogens, pesticides, saltwater intrusion and a rise in prescription drugs found in water supplies have also been identified as threats to Long Island's deep-water aquifers.

Long Island is the largest agricultural region in New York State, and Suffolk County is the leading agricultural county in the state in terms of the wholesale value of its products. The industry is also a significant sales tax generator, accounts for more than 5,000 jobs and serves as one of the foundations of the island's tourism industry, the advocacy group stressed. Agriculture is also vital to open space preservation and is a major source of locally-grown food, horticultural and marine products, the bureau said.

"Water quality is essential to quality of life here on Long Island," Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone said in a statement. "I am proud to work with the local Suffolk County farmers who are taking pro-active steps to reduce their nitrogen usage and protect our ground and surface waters while providing the local, healthy foods that sustain our communities and drive economic growth."

Gergela said Long Island farmers have in recent years been using alternative pest-control methods including organically focused controls and pest-resistant crops.

"Formulas for determining the rate and timing of nitrogen-based fertilizers also help minimize the impact on groundwater by applying the proper amount for the plant to absorb," he said.

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