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Wickham's Fruit Farm First on Long Island to Win Top State Environmental Award

Wickham's Fruit Farm was nominated for its forward thinking environmental practices, said Governor Andrew Cuomo.

By Lisa Finn (Patch Staff) - (<http://patch.com/users/lisa-finn-221e4bec>) August 12, 2016 10:18 am ET (<https://my.patch.com/article/26624765/edit>)

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CUTCHOGUE, NY — For years, Wickham's Fruit Farm in Cutchogue has been a pioneer in implementing environmentally forward practices — and this week, owner Tom Wickham traveled upstate to Seneca Falls where he was the recipient of a prestigious award.

Wickham's Fruit Farm garnered New York's top environmental award — the 2016 Agricultural Environmental Management, or AEM Award, said New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo.

Each year, the award honors the "outstanding efforts of a New York State farm to protect and preserve soil and water quality," a release said.

Wickham's Fruit Farm is the first fruit farm and the first farm on Long Island to receive the accolade.

"New York leads the nation in preserving our most precious natural resources, and building a cleaner, greener state and our farmers are taking innovative steps to protect our land and water to share in that collective responsibility," said Cuomo, congratulating Wickham's Fruit Farm. "They are a testament to the ongoing efforts of our farms and our soil and water districts to ensure they are being good stewards of the environment."

Wickham's Fruit Farm was recognized, along with the Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District, during a ceremony at Empire Farm Days in Seneca Falls this week.

The New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets Commissioner, the Empire State Potato Growers, and the American Agriculturist Magazine presented the award to ninth generation farm owner Tom Wickham.

"The conservation practices we've put in place and that are so critically important would not be possible without the active engagement of a number of parties — from the NYS Departments of Agriculture and Markets and Environmental Conservation, Cornell

University, Cornell Cooperative Extension, the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, and of course, the Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District. They have all provided great help and guidance in implementing projects that protect our land and the health of our community while improving our operation," Wickham said.

The Wickham Farm was one of the first 50 farms to receive an AEM comprehensive farm plan in 1999.

As early adopters of the principles of AEM, Wickham's Fruit Farm has implemented several practices that protect ground and surface water, as well as other natural resources, and that have also improved the farm's profitability, the governor's release said.

For example, the Wickham family has participated in many cost-share programs and implemented conservation best management practices for the last two decades, including the district's fuel tank replacement program, in which they have replaced three fuel tanks with environmentally sound tanks; the installation of a micro-irrigation system, which helps to conserve water throughout the farm; and the innovative installation of seasonal high tunnel that is being used to grow cherry trees.

The seasonal high tunnel is the first of its kind in the area, Cuomo said.

"The Wickhams have made good environmental practices a part of their daily life on the farm, and we congratulate them on their commitment to protect and conserve the quality of our soil and water. With support from the Suffolk County SWCD and other critical partners, the Wickhams have been able to implement progressive farming practices that are will be a model for generations to come," said Agriculture Commissioner Richard Ball.

In addition, the farm has worked closely with the Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District, which provides technical assistance to advance agricultural environmental management practices within the county. The district uses the feedback to improve its own efforts for environmental management in agriculture.

Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District Soil District Technician Sharon Frost, who also attended the event, said the SCSWCD was proud to be the recipient of the 2016 NYS AEM Award.

"We are also very proud of Tom Wickham and his accomplishments as he has participated in the AEM program since 1999," she said.

The Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District has an agricultural environmental management program that has assisted over 278 farms since its inception.

The district focuses on assisting farmers with programs that help protect Long Island's sole source aquifer, which provides drinking water to more than 2.7 million people.

The district has also successfully administered grant funding for programs such as fuel tank replacement, nutrient management planning, pesticide sprayer retrofits, and the installation agricultural handling facilities.

The AEM program aims to guide the district in assisting farmers in protecting the environment while meeting their economic goals.

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The annual Agricultural Environmental Management Award is jointly sponsored by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, American Agriculturalist Magazine and the Empire State Potato Growers.

Award winners are chosen from nominees submitted by County Soil and Water Conservation Districts statewide. The first AEM award was presented in 2002; prior to that, the award was called the Ag Stewardship Award.

Paving the way forward

Reflecting on the award, Wickham told Patch this week, "The thing that's significant is that this is the first time they've selected someone from Long Island." In the past, the award has traditionally gone to upstate growers, he said.

Wickham said he was nominated by the Suffolk County Water and Conservation District.

Protecting the environment is critical on Long Island, Wickham said.

"On Long Island, what we need to do is to prevent contamination of the groundwater. Our farm has adopted a number of practices that help to mitigate potential contamination of the groundwater," he said.

Those practices, he said, were put in place with the assistance of the Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District.

Some of those practices, he said, including building a structure where pesticides are mixed for the sprayer so none are washed into the groundwater; rebuilding a dike, planting orchards with special grass to reduce runoff into local water bodies, micro-irrigation, utilizing slow release fertilizer, a reduction in pesticide spraying, and utilizing pheromones in orchards for mating disruption.

Wickham said he was "pleased" with the award.

"Suffolk County is way out here, away from the rest of New York State. The problems we have are different, our type of agriculture is different, the cost structure of our farms is different. I was pleased that we were able to participate in the awareness process."

At the event, Wickham said he spoke and outlined Suffolk County's major issues, which revolve primarily around preserving groundwater and the steps farmers are taking to try and deal with those concerns.

"Farmers tend to think of themselves as individualists and doing things on their own but we have, in Suffolk County, a first class team of agricultural support services," Wickham said.

Those groups include the Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Cornell Cooperative Extension, he said.

"All of those focus as a team and each one provides support services to agriculture and to farmers like me — and, in particular, provide help with environmental issues," Wickham said.

Of the event, Frost said, "It was fantastic."

Frost said Wickham was nominated for his advanced environmental practices. "He's really come a long way in implementing all these practices and reducing nitrogen," she said. "He's just done so many things to protect the ground and surface waters that surround his farm, it's amazing. He's a visionary."

She added that Wickham has worked diligently at environmental protection. "We're proud of Tom for all of his accomplishments — and for being a superior land steward."

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