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Environment

Cutchogue farm wins state's top environmental agriculture award

by Nicole Smith | 08/18/2016 9:00 AM

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Wickham's Fruit Farm owner Tom Wickham was recently honored for implementing environmentally sustainable practices to preserve groundwater quality. (Credit: Nicole Smith)

New York State handed out its first Agricultural Environmental Management Award in 2002. In its first 14 years, the honor, considered the state's top agricultural environmental award, had never gone to a farm in Suffolk County.

That finally changed last week.

Wickham's Fruit Farm owners Tom and Gekee Wickham received the award, which highlights "the outstanding efforts of a New York State farm to protect and preserve soil and water quality," during an Aug. 10 ceremony at Empire Farm Days in Seneca Falls, N.Y. Wickham's is also the first fruit farm to ever receive the honor.

"It's nice; I'm pleased," Mr. Wickham said in an interview this week. "For me, I'm just glad there is recognition of the needs of Suffolk County and the farms that we have out here."

The Wickhams' historic bicentennial farm, which spans 200 acres along Main Road in Cutchogue, was among the first 50 farms in New York to adopt an comprehensive agricultural environmental management plan in 1999. The plan is a voluntary program that helps farmers balance cost-effective and environmentally conscious decisions.

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Some of the farm's green initiatives include replacing single-barrel fuel tanks with double-lined ones to reduce the risk of soil contamination, reducing the usage of nitrogen-rich fertilizer and incorporating a micro-irrigation system to water crops more efficiently.

"The Wickhams have made good environmental practices a part of their daily life on the farm and we congratulate them on their innovation and commitment to protect and conserve the quality of our soil and water," said state agriculture commissioner Richard Ball in a statement. Gov. Andrew Cuomo called the Wickhams' farm "a testament to the ongoing efforts of farms across the state to protect our environment and ensure the economic sustainability of New York's agricultural industry."

Among other accomplishments, the Wickhams said they also placed a mating-disruptive pheromone in all of the nearly 4,000 trees on the property so they could use fewer insecticides. In addition, they sold the development rights on about two-thirds of their land and constructed a building with a concrete floor to prevent any chemicals spilled during mixing from seeping into the groundwater. Additionally, the couple replaced nearly two miles of levees and dikes damaged during Superstorm Sandy and installed a weather system that Mr. Wickham said gives him precise information so he doesn't need to overspray his crops.

Mr. Wickham, a ninth-generation farmer, credited numerous agencies — including the New York State departments of agriculture and markets and environmental conservation, Cornell Cooperative Extension, the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District — with helping the farm embrace environmentally sound practices.

It was the Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District that nominated Wickham's Fruit Farm for the distinction.

"It was really something because they've never recognized a downstate farm before," said Sharon Frost, a soil district technician. "So we were very surprised that he got that recognition."

Both Mr. Wickham and Ms. Frost said one of the biggest reasons to implement environmentally sustainable practices is to preserve groundwater quality. That affects not only the farm itself, Mr. Wickham said, but the community at large, because the water touches the food we buy and flows from our sinks.

Ms. Frost also noted how important it was that Mr. Wickham, who comes from a "traditional farming background," really embraces the new environmentally beneficial programs in his work.

"We can't expect to continue to farm the way our fathers and grandfathers did forever," said Mr. Wickham, a former Southold Town supervisor. "We need to move up to a higher technological level. We need to use more science and do it with more care. These programs are designed to help us move to that higher level."

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