

Farmers' Holistic Approach Leads To Commendation

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Bradford County Conservation District vice president Dean Jackson (right) presented Greg (left) and Julie Perry with the 2011 Outstanding Conservation Cooperator Award at the agency's annual appreciation banquet on Dec. 8.

By Rick Hiduk

Dairy farmer Julie Perry loves the land that she farms and gets her inspiration from nature. Approaching farming from a perspective that honors the earth gives her the satisfaction and motivation to continue with a career that is replete with challenges and sometimes only marginally profitable.

The holistic and humane methods that she and her husband, Greg, have employed at their Sundance Life Farm in Rome Township caught the attention of administrators of the Bradford County Conservation District (BCCD), who honored the Perrys with the 2011 Outstanding Cooperator Award at their annual appreciation banquet held on Dec. 8 at the RiverStone Inn in Wysox Township.

"I have always been attached to the land and the basic things that make us human," said Julie, who related that she was not familiar with the award until she learned from a BCCD associate in October that she and her husband had been nominated.

According to BCCD manager Mike Lovegreen, the agency has presented the award since 1958 to acknowledge special qualities of a local farm. The Bradford- Sullivan Bankers Association has sponsored the award during that time to recognize progressive agricultural methods that enhance the value of the land while also insuring its long-term viability and management of resources.

Sundance Life Farm is a 50-acre dairy and livestock operation that the Perrys purchased in 2007. Prior to that, Julie had worked on numerous farms in Susquehanna County since 1985, where she honed her knowledge and theories as a nutrient management specialist.

"We look at soil testing and how the nutrients, whether they be chemical or natural, are applied to the land to make sure that we are giving ultimate fertilization without excess that can runoff," Julie explained.

Sundance Life Farm was among many initially referred to BCCD by several countywide agencies that have participated in promotion over the years. The list is paired down and the process of interviewing the farm owners begins. This year, Lovegreen noted, that task was

taken on by agricultural resource specialist Emily Bailey. The BCCD board made its decision from the list of finalists.

Lovegreen explained that the goal of the promotion is to select a farm that literally leads by example. The method by which the Outstanding Cooperator is chosen "takes on a larger scope than what actually goes on on the ground," he stated.

"We're seeing a bigger diversity of the types of farms we are dealing with," said Lovegreen, noting that BCCD looks at each nominee's current conservation plan, long-term maintenance plans, cultural practices, and community leadership.

The Perrys, he related, employ a variety of practices in the maintenance of grazing and manure that made an impression on the board. "It's not your typical dairy farm," said Lovegreen.

Greg Perry is, by profession, a corrosion engineer whom Julie met on facebook after her previous husband passed away. Julie recalls that Greg doubted that life as a farmer would appeal to him.

"I'm an engineer," he told her. "I need things that are academically stimulating."

Julie noted with a laugh that Greg has since realized that there are many aspects of farming to which he can apply an analytical and scientific approach.

"He had no idea what went into doing it right and doing it well," she stated. Greg was born in Australia and moved to West Chester as a youth, eventually following in the footsteps of his father, who was also a corrosion engineer. Greg and Julie are assisted with their farm work by sons, Nick Lopatofsky, 20, and Quinn Casey, 11, both of whom have acquired a sincere respect for farming, whether or not they will pursue it as a career.

According to a BCCD press release, the Perrys have implemented a number of "best management practices," including a fencing system, animal trails and walkways, water lines, water facilities, a stream crossing, roof runoff control, access road, and an underground outlet that addresses runoff issues and prevents mud pits that are unhealthy for animals and the environment.

"Intensive rotational grazing" is another element utilized by the Perrys to prevent erosion. Their cows are led to a different pasture every day. She admits that the rainy conditions this past year presented some unique challenges, washing away many of the paved pathways the Perrys had installed.

Undaunted, they continue to review standard operating procedures for animal welfare and routine maintenance protocols for their farm. Julie related that she has worked closely with agricultural educators at BCCD since 2007, and she is excited that the agency is adopting more of her holistic concepts. She believes that the future of the small farmer depends on establishing a deeper relationship with the earth, and she is fearful that government protocol is moving in the opposite direction.

"The regulations coming down are more geared to larger operations like those in California," Julie remarked. "I think that it's going to push a lot of the smaller farms out of the business."

She is concerned that practices employed by large-scale farm operations will erode more than the land on which they are situated in the long run. "The small farms are the cleaner way to go," she remarked. "Visibility causes accountability, and the visibility of small farms means that the farmers are held to humane standards." Julie is also an odor-management planner, and she worries about what goes on behind the high fences of factory-type farms.

Despite not previously knowing that such an award existed, Julie Perry said that she and Greg were thrilled to receive the citation and that they enjoyed the good food and good company at the BCCD banquet. "We were very honored," she stated, adding that she looks forward to a growing relationship with BCCD and sharing her holistic farming concepts with other cooperators.

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