

## **Developing a Farmer-to-Farmer Network to Support Development and Use of Agricultural Environmental Management Systems (AgEMS)**

### **Purpose**

*The purpose of this proposal is to support development of a national Agricultural Environmental Management System Network (AgEMSNet). The purpose of the AgEMSNet is to support producer improvement in environmental performance through use of agricultural environmental management systems.*

### **Situation and Need**

Changes in agricultural practices and increased monitoring of agricultural impacts on the environment are resulting in increased public concerns and more policies to address them. Producers recognize the need to be responsive to public concerns and the policies that result. They are also concerned about how these policies impact the management flexibility of their operations and profitability of U.S agriculture.

Producers who have participated in pilot and research based environmental management system projects recognize that the use of environmental management systems helps them to improve the management of their operation and results in improved environmental and economic performance. It results in preventing pollution, compliance with regulations and provides documentation of their environmental performance.

Development and use of environmental management systems on farms requires technical and educational support. It requires the identification of clear benefits for those who make the extra effort to develop and use these systems. For this approach to be seen as credible in the eyes of concerned citizens and policy makers, it requires the development of an objective third party performance evaluation mechanism. Producers from agricultural environmental management system (AgEMS) pilot efforts believe that the most effective way to build these support systems is through a producer led initiative working with public and private organizations and consumers..

### **Developing a Producer-led AgEMS Initiative**

Developing a National AgEMS Farmer to Farmer Network (AgEMSNet) will involve building cooperation and support from agri-businesses, producer and consumer organizations, environmental organizations and state and federal agencies. The initiative must increase sharing of information on producers experiences related to the development and use of AgEMSs. This information sharing will result in improved understanding of AgEMSs, how they can be used to identify site-specific environmental risks, actions that can be taken to prevent pollution and comply with regulations, and procedures for documenting environmental protection performance. Documentation of AgEMS actions will increase concerned publics and policy makers confidence that

sound environmental management is being practiced. It will also document management and economic impacts of AgEMSs.

Information sharing alone will not be enough for this approach to succeed. Support programs that assist producers in the development of their EMSs and provided training to agencies and organizations that assist producers in EMS development are essential. The AgEMSNet will support efforts to raise funds that will be used to develop pilot EMSs on farms and develop technical, educational and research support through agri-businesses, organizations and agencies that assist producers in the development and use and evaluation of EMSs.

The AgEMSNet will work with food processors and others to build labeling and marketing niches for products produced through certified EMS programs. It will also work with State and Federal agencies, universities, grower groups, processors, Protected Harvest and other environmental labeling programs to establish certification criteria and procedures that are credible. These criteria will reflect the intent of the international ISO14001 standards, while relating more specifically to U.S. agriculture.

**The goals of the AgEMSNet Association are to:**

- Establish AgEMSs as a functional tool to identify and address agricultural environmental risks and support actions that prevent pollution and compliance with regulations while maintaining or improving a farm's sustainability
- Educate agricultural stakeholders on the use and value of agricultural environmental management systems.
- Support the development, use and recognition of market-based incentives for improved environmental performance.
- Promote voluntary actions that improve environmental performance through pollution prevention, compliance with regulations and continual improvement.
- Educate producers on existing regulations so that they can document their compliance.
- Enhance the economic, social and ecological stability of agricultural operations.
- Strengthen partnerships between agricultural producers, organizations and others who support the purposes of the AgEMSNet Association.
- Close the gap between the availability of knowledge and the application of knowledge about agricultural environmental management systems

**Components of the proposed AgEMSNet initiative include:**

- Establishing a communications network with producers who are interested in developing new or maintaining existing EMSs for their operations;
- Providing technical assistance to producers and organizations that support producers through technical, educational and financial assistance;
- Sharing information about existing certification standards and how they can be applied to farming operations; sharing information about documentation procedures, annual reviews and third party performance evaluations to document actions and show accountability;
- Supporting use of train the trainer programs that help reach larger geographic areas and diverse agricultural audiences; developing and using measures to document achievements towards meeting organizational goals and objectives;
- Establishing a recognition program for producers who develop and use EMSs, and;
- Supporting efforts that will provide funding support to producers and those who are assisting producers in the development, use and maintenance of EMSs.

### **Benefits of an AgEMSNet**

AgEMSs are a pro-active approach to identifying site-specific environmental risks and taking actions to prevent pollution. EMSs are based in understanding and complying with regulations, but go beyond compliance by identifying and addressing all environmental risks whether they are regulated or not. EMSs require an annual review to evaluate performance and make changes where necessary. This results in a continual improvement process and self-monitoring that improves environmental performance. It also results in development of emergency response plans that reduce negative environmental impacts if and when accidents occur. These responsible actions of producers reduce demands on public agencies and reduce cost to society related to regulatory actions.

AgEMSs benefit producers by enabling them to implement an on-going self-monitoring and improvement process that supports improved economic performance and pollution prevention. This results in reducing costs associated with inefficiencies, reducing legal costs from environmental mishaps, reducing regulatory pressure, increased marketing/pricing opportunities, and improved relationships with neighbors, the community, regulators and environmentalists.

AgEMSs support improved communication with employees, clear understanding of environmental risks and operating procedures that prevent pollution. Ag EMSs increase efficiencies that lead to energy and water conservation, improved nutrient and feed utilization, reuse and recycling of inputs, protection of air, water and soil quality and benefits to wildlife.

The creation of an AgEMSNet will support increased producer development and use of AgEMSs. It will enhance the environmental accountability of producers to their neighbors, to regulators and to society in general. It will support integrating AgEMSs into State and Federal programs and in marketing programs of agri-businesses. It will result in improved environmental performance in a cost effective way that also supports improved farm management and profitability.

## **Funding**

Start-up funding to establish the AgEMSNet will require \$200,000 per year for three years. Matching support will be pursued through contributions from agri-businesses, commodity and producer organizations, environmental organizations and foundations. It is anticipated that these funds will support the following activities in each year of this effort:

1. Establishment and operation of a non-profit organization to coordinate cooperative conservation support from agri-businesses, farm organizations, environmental organizations and state and federal agencies;
2. Creation and maintenance of a cooperative information sharing network that supports producer, and agri-business development and use of AgEMSs;
3. Assistance to state and local organizations and agencies to develop and implement technical and educational programs that aid in producer and agri-business development and use of AgEMSs;
4. Assistance to state and local organizations and agencies to develop and implement certification programs that are credible and document the performance of AgEMSs;
5. Assistance to producers for the development and implementation of AgEMSs;
6. Cooperative efforts to develop and conduct research to document the effectiveness of AgEMSs;
7. Organization and sharing of information on market based incentives related to the use and certification of AgEMSs; and,
8. Cooperative efforts to offer train-the-trainer programs for agricultural service providers.