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For Plain Sect, Helping Hand Preferable To Long Arm Of The Law

By Rona Kobel

[Chesapeake Bay Journal](#)

For several years, Sam Zook kept an eye on the manure from his 50 dairy cows on his farm outside of Strasburg, in Lancaster County, PA. He didn't always like what he saw.

"I realized every time it rained, it rained on my barnyard, and it flushed my barnyard down to the stream, and it kind of bothered me," Zook said.

So Zook, an Amish farmer, did something that was practically unheard of among members of his close-knit faith until just a few years ago: He took government money to build a manure storage system that would keep his cow's waste from getting into Little Beaver Creek.

The storage system cost about \$150,000 and can store up to 250,000 gallons of manure — about six months' worth. Before his farm put in the system, Zook could only hold six weeks' worth of manure. That meant that in the winter he often spread the manure on frozen ground on his 77-acre dairy farm. With Little Beaver Creek just beyond his tree line, Zook said, "I didn't want to take the risk" of polluting the stream.

The money for his manure storage came from PennVEST, the Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority, which funds large sewer, water and drinking water projects throughout the state. In 2009, the authority added agriculture to its list of projects and has focused on the Plain Sect communities in Lancaster.

The Plain Sect communities include the Amish and several groups of Old Mennonites. Among other things, the Plain Sects believe in a strict separation of church and state, which makes them reluctant to accept government money. They eschew modern technology and ride in horse-drawn buggies. Much of their farm land that has been worked for centuries, using many of the un-mechanized practices their grandparents did.

So far, PennVEST has distributed more than \$5 million in funds to conservation districts for farmers of all faiths to put in manure storage operations, manure composting and stormwater runoff improvements. About half of that money went to the Lancaster County Conservation District, which distributed it to many Plain Sect farmers.

Zook received an additional \$50,000 from Pennvest for improvements, including heavy-use concrete pads where his cows gather to prevent their manure from entering the streams; concrete stream crossings and roof runoff management.

"There's a pretty dramatic difference there," said Terry Fisher, PennVEST application developer for the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts. County districts work with farmers on their applications and then pass the money to the farmers when the grant comes through. In Zook's case, the Lancaster County district received the grant and its Plain Sect outreach manager, Dennis Eby, helped Zook take on the project.

Like many farmers in this green corner of Southeastern Pennsylvania, Zook had adopted many conservation practices on his own. He has been farming without tilling his soil for several years, and he fenced off Little Beaver Creek in 2001 after he became worried that his cows would pollute a popular fishing stream. He plants cover crops each winter. But those investments were small compared to the manure storage operation.

Over the last five years, the Lancaster County Conservation District and several nonprofit environmental groups have focused on the Plain Sect communities. Communication is not always easy, as the Amish do not use e-mail and some do not use the telephone. Eby, who still owns a farm amid many Plain Sect families in the county, felt comfortable leveraging his personal relationships to try to persuade farmers to adopt more conservation practices. So did Lamonte Garber of the [Chesapeake Bay Foundation](#), who grew up in the area and was raised in the Mennonite faith. Sometimes, they succeeded, but progress was slow.

That changed in the winter of 2009, with the sting at Watson's Run.

Shortly after President Barack Obama signed his executive order to protect the Chesapeake Bay, EPA staffers made an unannounced visit to the small watershed, where 24 out of the 25 farmers were Amish. The agency found that 85 percent of the farmers did not have the proper nutrient management or manure management plans. But the violations were deeper than just paperwork: 16 of the farms sampled had high levels of nitrates in their drinking water. According to the EPA, one farmer told inspectors that he had installed a water treatment system because too many of his calves were born dead.

In the 40 years since the Clean Water Act was passed, no one in the area could remember an inspection like that. But the EPA wasn't done. It then went to Muddy Creek, a watershed with about 80 farms, and issued more warnings for violations.

"It was a real wake-up call for farmers in this area," Garber said, "because even though they heard, 'the government is coming,' it rarely happened."

It also galvanized the conservation community. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation developed its "Buffer Bonus" program, which sought to sign up 50 Plain Sect farmers. The deal was that farmers who agreed to put in a buffer, using U.S. Department of Agriculture Funds, could then receive \$4,000 additional funds per acre of buffer for another conservation practice.

Already, Garber said, the foundation has signed up 40 farmers.

"With some of these farms, it's a real negotiation," he said.

But, he added, "I think that guys like Sam are realizing that their farms are so contrary to environmental requirements that they are going to have to do something."

Eby said that he thinks the motivation to do the right thing is stronger than the fear of the EPA coming back in the black SUVs. There have been fewer fines and warnings, and more emphasis on working together to fix problems. But, he said, part of the impetus comes from Pennsylvania, which now has stronger manure management requirements. For example, the state requires farmers to manage manure concentration areas, which some farmers would previously

have said was pasture area and wasn't managed for manure.

Another part of the success, Eby said, is in convincing the Plain Sect farmers that it is in their economic interest to keep water and soil on the farm. Stormwater, when managed well, can be reused for a lot of farm tasks.

And the Plain Sect are not immune to peer pressure. They see their neighbors making big changes, Eby said, and they become interested.

"You get into one community, a couple people do things, and then a bunch more want to do stuff," Eby said. "I think we've come a long way. There's still a lot to be done, but it's a one-farm-at-a-time type of thing."

(Reprinted from the July-August [Chesapeake Bay Journal](#))