

News Release

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Maryland Dairy Producers Win National Sustainable Farming Award

Chestertown, Md. – Maryland farmers Edwin and Marian Fry, who have spent decades building diverse, profitable enterprises, have been named the 2006 Northeast Region winners of the Patrick Madden Award for Sustainable Agriculture. The award honors exemplary farmers around the U.S. and will be presented on Aug. 16 by the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program at its national conference in Wisconsin.



Combining crops and livestock has allowed the Frys to earn a comfortable income and practice good stewardship. At their home farm on the rural Eastern Shore, their farming mainstay is dairy -- they milk 250 cows and raise 225 replacement heifers annually. In a cyclical, symbiotic relationship, they feed their extra organic grain to their herd and spread dairy manure back on the crop fields as organic fertilizer.

“The Madden Award is SARE’s way of encouraging a whole-farm approach to agriculture,” says Fred Magdoff, Northeast SARE regional coordinator. “We look for farmers who see their farms as a natural, complex system, then use that understanding to become profitable and sustainable.”

The Frys exemplify those principles: “Dairy is a good business and it has been good to our family,” says Ed Fry, whose grandfather started the farm and whose father still works with him at Fair Hill Farms near Chestertown. “It’s challenging, but it provides us an opportunity to be diversified and blends well with other enterprises.”

Fry saw a lucrative opportunity when Horizon Dairy purchased a nearby farm in the 1990s. He began transitioning to organic crops and now sell organic feed to the dairy at premium prices. “Horizon was a breath of fresh air, and I respect their approach to stewardship,” Ed Fry says. “I wanted to capture that niche market as much as I could.”

Then, in 1999, the family began leasing crop land on the former Naval Academy Farm near Annapolis. Today, Maryland Sunrise Farm is the largest certified organic farm in the state, and its location in Anne Arundel County allows the public to see organic principles in action.

“As part of the American farming tradition, we have strong values associated with land stewardship and the production of food,” says Marian Fry, who, among other tasks, hosts events from planting festivals to farm tours for kids. “People are much more distanced from food production and need a connection to the land. We help them to love it and recognize that healthy food comes from healthy earth.”

With their main farm located near the Chester River, the Frys take their impact on the Chesapeake River Watershed seriously, rotating crops to build the soil and minimize runoff.

They also have catch ponds to capture sediment, a manure structure, and have worked with USDA NRCS to plant buffer trees and fences alongside the tributary that runs through the farm. Finally, they planted 40 acres in permanent pasture where their herd of heifers grazes as part of the Conservation Security Program.

The Frys continually look beyond their farm for ways to support Maryland agriculture. The farm employs up to 20 people a year, and Ed Fry was a founding member of Chesapeake Fields, a value-added grain marketing cooperative on the Eastern Shore. He has served on the University of Maryland board of regents, and sat on a search committee for a new agricultural dean. Marian Fry worked with the Extension Service and Kent County Board of Education to bring every fourth grader in the county to the farm.

“It comes as no surprise that the Frys’ vision for the future is broad and diversified,” says John Minnick, an NRCS district conservationist who nominated the couple for the award. “They have the diversified, dynamic farm business model necessary to maintain and improve profitability in their agricultural operations, and they believe in the future of organics as ‘value added’ for the environment and the bottom line.”

The Frys are joined by other regional Madden Award winners, including:

- Alex and Betsy Hitt, vegetable growers in Graham, N.C.
- Paul Muller of Full Belly Farm, a community farm in Capay Valley, Calif.
- Rex Spray, an organic crop and beef producer in Mt. Vernon, Ohio

Editors: For more information or high-resolution images, contact the SARE Communications Specialist at sare_comm@sare.org.

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