

## Field Day Podcast Ep. 9 Laura Campbell.mp3

**Jordan:** Welcome to Episode 9 of the field day podcast brought to you by the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation. Today we take a turn to the North with Laura Campbell from Michigan Farm Bureau. We had a good discussion on the relevancy of issues for their state and then kind of how it affects things in Ohio and really a good conversation on comparing and contrasting what's going on across the border. Enjoy.

**Jordan:** All right we'll get started here so tell me who you are, where you're from. What you're doing. Just give me whatever intro you have for me.

**Laura:** All right. Thanks for having me. My name's Laura Campbell and I manage the Agricultural Ecology Department for Michigan Farm Bureau. I work out of Lansing and travel all over the state and obviously all over the region working on environmental issues and helping farmers use good practices on their farms.

**Jordan:** Good deal, you are Me and Dr. Antosch's counterpart in Michigan Farm Bureau so I guess we share a lot of issues such as water quality. What are some things that you're working on in Michigan, what are the hot button topics?

**Laura:** Water quality is one of our continuing hot topics and one that's of really high importance to our members. Lake Erie is a very small portion of the state but it has kind of an outsized influence because of how much media attention it gets. We've got a lot of other areas in the state that we're looking at to be the potential next Lake Erie. Our Saginaw Bay Area has a lot of the same conditions: shallow waters, lots of Ag, lots of people pointing fingers at farmers. So we want to keep on top of what's going on, what the newest solutions are, how do we help farmers be part of the solution so that they are not being regulated and being blamed for problems.

**Jordan:** Yeah I guess I never thought about that until you said IT. How do you manage so many waterfronts? You know, I'm sure there's water going every which way and there's different bays and different areas for influence from nutrients. How do you guys handle that from a farm bureau side?

**Laura:** It gets very complicated particularly because we've got so many different regions of the state that have so many different localized issues. Lots of specialty crops, lots of different conditions depending on which lake shore you're on. So, really what we do is try to work with our state agencies and with NRCS and other USDA programs to customize as much as possible the programs and the practices that farmers can use. That's actually where our stewardship program comes into play. The Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program or MAEAP because that does individualized farm-by farm-plans and prescriptions for activities on your farm to help you with your stewardship.

**Jordan:** Yeah so tell me about me, how did it come about? What's the structure of it, what is MAEAP?.

**Laura:** Sure. MAEAP was a program that was actually started by farmers. We had a group of livestock farmers back in the 1990s who as they were looking at more regulations and more oversight from both the state and the federal government, they really wanted a system that could help them to not only comply with all of the regulations that they had to meet but also with at what at that time was our brand new Right to Farm law. We had generally accepted AG management practices, we had environmental standards we had all of these other programs, plus their own commodity groups and their own buyers had environmental standards and the farmers really needed one system that would help to encompass it all. One system that they if they were meeting the

standards of a program they knew that they were covered for everything else and that's really one of the big benefits of MAET. It's not an easy program. There's a lot of farmers who start and never get done, never get to the point where they're verified because it's not easy to meet the standards, but it meets all of the standards for everything else that they're going to have to do. So they know that if they can get through that program they can get through anything and that's one of the really big benefits of it. Once we had the farmers support we started getting more partners onboard. Obviously our land grant institution, MSU, was a really key part of that because it's their research that sets the standards and those get reviewed every year and then we got support from our legislature and from our governor's office and ended up being able to sign the program into law, not to require it but to create a funding source for it and so that program is now funded through a fee that's tacked on to fertilizers. Everybody pays it but that pays for the technicians out on the ground to help farmers with their individualized farm plans and they can do that at no cost because their salaries and all the programs that they use are paid for by those fertilizer fees.

**Jordan:** That's kind of a closed loop system then, you know, the funding is coming from ag and then obviously supporting nutrients from coming out of farm fields. Has it been tough or was it tough to get people to enroll in the program?

**Laura:** It was at first when nobody knew anything about it. We had to do a lot of work to help farmers to understand what the standards were, why there was benefit to them participating in it. Like I said it's not easy to finish and unless you are able to coordinate it with either some farm bill financial assistance or some local initiatives. It's not cheap either. Farmers do spend a lot of their own money to be able to finish the practices that are under these standards. But the advantage that they get at the end is: number one, they get some legislative protection. So if there is a regulation that's put in place on a watershed and farmers and everyone else using the land are expected to adopt certain practices or use certain standards to stop pollutants from entering the waterways including nutrients farmers who are verified under the meat program don't have to do anything else because they're already considered to be compliant with that. That's one big advantage. Another one is that especially now that the MAEAP brand and the logo are getting to be more familiar. It's becoming a popular marketing tool so that farmers can use that to communicate with their buyers with the public with farm markets and with anybody else who is looking for farms who are meeting sustainability and environmental standards and they can say look my farms been environmentally verified I'm using good practices to protect water and air quality.

**Jordan:** Do you find that especially with the farmer-market type farms, is that a hindrance at all that people get singled out if they're not certified or is that more used as an encouragement to be certified?

**Laura:** It's really used as an encouragement to be certified. I would say the main challenge that we have is with the commodities that get mixed together. So if you're a dairy producer, if you're a field crop row crop producer and you know that whatever you sell is going into sort of a common storage area with everybody else's materials, it's a lot harder to try to say, hey my product is MAEAP verified or hey I want to slap an environmentally verified logo on this box of cereal or something else because then that becomes almost an unfunded mandate. You have to have everybody be verified in order to claim that your product is verified. So that's one thing we want to be sensitive to and want to make sure that we keep this as a voluntary program. But for the folks who are selling direct and a lot we have a lot of specialty farmers up in Michigan a lot of fruit and vegetable production a lot of farm markets. It's been a great tool for them because it's a way that they can talk with consumers about the good things that they're doing on their farms.

**Jordan:** So we've laid out the benefits pretty well but what are the biggest obstacles for not only the farmers but even maybe on the certification side the people who are actually doing the certifying of

the farms.

**Laura:** Some of the challenges that we had really a lot of them surround the cost of the program. We do align ourselves and align the standards of the MAEAP program with NRCS standard so that you're eligible for cost share under those programs if you're working toward MAEAP but if you don't get that funding if you don't you know if you end up not being able to get a contract or if you don't want to work through Farmville programs the cost can be a hindrance. There are some other logistical challenges too. So if you want to be verified under the system that looks at your buildings and farmstead for instance and you've got just a situation where your property lines don't match up to where you can move a well to a safe distance away from your manure storage for instance or if you've got you know there's nowhere you can put your fuel pad that isn't too close for the standards to be able to meet it for verifications. A lot of things like that mean that there are barriers that farmers won't ever be able to be verified but they're still doing a lot of good practices. And that's something we've started with the program recently is a confidential database that doesn't release the farmers names or locations but tracks the practices they're using at the watershed and the county scales so that we can say, hey even if they're not verified here's all the good things that they are still doing and the benefits we're still seeing from it.

**Jordan:** Not to get too far off track because I know that's one of the things that we would want to put in place are looking for information in Ohio about all the good things the farmers are doing already without having to be regulated.

**Laura:** Right.

**Jordan:** How has that been approached, you know, outside of the MAEAP program with farmers, is that something you guys have looked at all?

**Laura:** It has. Really a lot of the progress we've seen on that has been at the local scale. So through our conservation districts, through local initiatives, one really good example that's in the Lake Erie Basin since Lake Erie is such a national focus is the River Raisin Watershed Council that has been up and running for years and years and they are actually sort of directed by farmers who host regional shop talks and compare notes. They talk about conservation practices. They have a really proactive Conservation District that gets grants and seeks out funding to help farmers with practices. They do a lot of just individualized pay for performance programs and other things that farmers can use regardless of who they're working with or not to be able to advance their stewardship practices and the good things they're doing on their farm. So we like to try to use a yes and everything in the above approach when it comes to encouraging good stewardship on the farm to have things to talk about to say you don't need to regulate us. We're already doing it.

**Jordan:** So back to the MAEAP program, if someone's in MAEAP and they are certified and a number different areas or whatever what happens when they kind of fall into line. You know what happens to the bad actors in that certification process?

**Laura:** If you aren't following MAEAP practices, it operates on a re-verification cycle every five years. So your technician is always in contact with you and is always helping you and letting you know when the standards get updated or you know and checking in to see how things are going on your farm. But the state actually comes and re verifies you every five years if you don't meet those standards at that time you can't be re-verified. You don't get to put out your sign, you don't get to use the marketing logo and you've got to work your way back up to those standards in order to get verified again. It does happen, you know, you have farmers you know that either because of things that are out of their control or you know or just things that happen on the farm that they'll that they'll have violations that will happen. And really what we try to do is work with them as much as

possible to get them back onto the program and back using the practices that they need to use. That gets a lot of cooperation from both our State Department of Agriculture and our State Environmental Quality Agency.

**Jordan:** And so then say they have four different certifications or and those are on a one by one basis so if they lose one they don't lose the other three.

**Laura:** Correct.

**Jordan:** So you still can be verified in one specific region you know per section of your farm?

**Laura:** Yep.

**Jordan:** So it seems like you just have to work your way to get that re-certification.

**Laura:** So right. Right. And it's not so much a section of the farm. So if the systems work in this way: there's a cropping system that covers all of your field production, so whether you're growing row crops, vegetables, fruits, wine, grapes, anything that's one system. Another system is your farmstead which is your buildings, wells, fuel storage that kind of thing. Another one is livestock. Any of your animal handling and manure management. And then the newest one is forest wetlands and habitats. That's for any woodlots or if you're managing timber or anything else on your property. So you're not really in that way I guess you could say it's sort of sections of the farm but it's not like you'll verify half a field and then the other half is not verified because it's got a steep slope and you can't figure out how to stop the erosion, that could not pass through the process.

**Jordan:** That makes sense. What would be say, Ohio or Pennsylvania or Indiana or whoever wanted to use MAEAP kind of as a shell or a backbone to a program in their state, what would you start with or what would be something different or new that you would add to it if you could start another one in another state?

**Laura:** Well I think that a lot of things that Michigan did, we did the right way in that we started it with farmers that we brought in the university to make sure we had high quality standards and verifiable standards. We use EPA and our NRCS modeling and practices for figuring out the benefits of those practices we use and NRCS guidelines for how to do the practices. All of that stuff aligns well and means that it's not just one more thing or one more piece of paper for the farmers to use that. I think we did right. What I would change if I were starting a brand new program is that I would start that practice tracking right from the beginning because we did not do that. We were only tracking practices of the farms who were completely done and verified. And now we're having to play catch up with it. We've got 10000 farms across the state that have started the MAEAP process and they may finish and they may not but they're doing good things across the landscape and we haven't been tracking it and we should have been. So that's one thing that I would start with. It's really important to get state agencies and you know leadership within your government involved in it. But I think that it can't be led by them it has to be led by the farmers or it will be out of our out of farmers control and it will be something that won't be workable for them.

**Jordan:** The information is not going to be passed back and forth as easily. You know one question I had was, what are your members of your farmer's views of their relationship with your Ag department or your state department.

**Laura:** It probably depends on who you ask. But generally I would say our relationship is pretty positive. One of the really good things about the program is these technicians who work with the farmers they will not turn around and turn you into the state environmental agency if they see a

violation out on the farm, instead they're going to work with that farmer to help them fix it. And so that provides a lot of relief for the farmers who might have a question about a practice they're doing or something a condition on their farm they don't know if it's compliant with the law they can ask their technician they can say hey is this a problem and do I need to fix this and if I need to fix it how do I fix it and they can do that in confidentiality and get that benefit of fixing the problem without having to expose themselves to risk and fines and violations and all that all the mean stuff that happens you know when you have the enforcement agencies come in.

**Jordan:** Yeah I think that's key because I think you got to inch your way towards compliance or to do something instead of you know not doing at all if you're scared of what the boogeyman could be and it's probably not that bad.

**Laura:** Right.

**Jordan:** That's interesting. I guess switching gears, another one of things we have correspondent a little bit is the aquifer situation that kind of stretches over multiple states. And I have been told it's the Michindoh as I've heard it pronounced both ways either way an aquifer that stretches across the region. Can you tell me a little bit about that situation because I really don't know that much, please fill me in.

**Laura:** Sure. I pronounce it Michindoh, if it's incorrect I'll apologize in advance. But this is a very large shallow aquifer that underlies the three states. It's about two million acres in size and the depth varies between meeting the surface level of the ground to about 200 feet deep. It is a glacial aquifer which means that it was it lies above the bedrock and is part of the glacial till that was brought down during the during the glacial period that we had about between 10 and 15000 years ago. So it's a fairly young aquifer. Most people would be familiar with it from the time, it was about 10 years ago when there was a proposal made to declare the Michindoh aquifer, a sole source aquifer because it is the only water source that is available for drinking water and for use by a lot of the communities that sit on top of it. And this is particularly important in northwest Ohio where there's not a lot of really good surface water sources that they can draw from. There are some reservoirs and a few rivers but you know but nothing really good and no good consistent source of water. That petition ended up not being completed. So the EPA never did declare it a sole source aquifer but it does remain an area of concern. Now there is a lot of water use out of that currently. I think the state of Ohio did an estimate and figured out that currently there is about 80 million gallons a day of water pulled out of the Michindoh aquifer just as it stands right now but there is some controversy around the newest proposal that is due to be made. The application hasn't been made yet but we understand that there's a developer who wants to put a large quantity withdrawal. We don't know how much. I've heard everything from five to 15 million gallons a day to be withdrawn from that aquifer and instead of going to a bottling plant or two you know some other industrial use. This would actually be sold to townships and municipalities for their use in drinking water systems. A lot of these currently get their drinking water from the city of Toledo. And with Toledo's problems with having to upgrade their water system means that their customers including a lot of these towns are going to be paying a lot higher rates so there's obviously some interest by those towns to potentially switch their water source and keep prices lower, but there's also a lot of concern of will the withdrawal that big effect either the local area where people are withdrawing water currently or potentially cause problems across the entire aquifer.

**Jordan:** It essentially could be up to 20 percent increase in withdrawing from the right or whatever the math is. It's pretty significant especially constantly from one spot.

**Laura:** Right. Right. And so there's obviously going to have to be a lot of really close review for this proposal when it gets made. You don't just stick a pipe in the ground and start pumping water

when you have when you have a withdrawal of that size and particularly within the Great Lakes Basin you have to go through a permitting process that will do a lot of extensive hydro geological studies, looking at potential impacts, looking at you know is the sighting of the of this withdrawal appropriate, is it going to affect other wells, is it going to affect surface waters, is it going to affect the static water level of the aquifer. All of those things are going to have to be reviewed before this permit can get approved. If it's for municipal drinking water use. They have to go through the additional process of a public utility. So there's a lot of hoops yet to go through once this thing gets proposed.

**Jordan:** What is the Michigan Farm Bureau stance on it? Are you guys in a wait and see? Do you guys have specific policy on this sort of stuff?

**Laura:** Absolutely, we're in a wait and see when it comes to this withdrawal. Our members have set policy that they opposed the Michindoh being declared a sole source aquifer and the reason for that is because it comes along with a whole boatload of regulations that would have really restricted land use for farmers in all three states because of the sensitivity they ask for and how shallow it is. So we didn't want to have EPA coming in and telling farmers what they can and can't do on their own lands just because it happens to be over this aquifer. But our members obviously have a lot of concern about water use. We've got a lot a lot of farms with wells and who use water and need water for their farms who are in this aquifer as well as Ohio and Indiana do too. So we're going to be watching it closely, we're going to be looking at the studies that are done surrounding the proposal to look at it, is there going to be an impact? Do we have anything that we have to be concerned about, but until then we're not going to take a position on it either way because we don't want to jump out in front of the thing and start you know start a panic when there may not be a reason for one.

**Jordan:** That makes sense. So what's on the horizon for Michigan Farm Bureau? Is are an issue that you think is going to pop up or do you think it's always just going to be water nutrient management for the foreseeable future. What else is on the docket for you guys as important issue?

**Laura:** Well water is obviously always going to be really important to Michigan. Our state touches four out of the five Great Lakes so it's never not going to be an issue for us. But really some of the things that we want to focus on for the future are really adopting new technologies getting you know getting programs and assistance in place to help farmers with better soil testing and using more variable rate technology and using a lot of the a lot of the global positioning systems and precision application that they can use that can really give them both an environmental benefit and an agronomic boost. So that's one of the things we're looking at we're also really keeping an eye on potential regulation coming in the future that would put more restrictions on livestock. Whether livestock are a significant part of nutrient issues in Lake Erie or not. Most people say that they're not but there are a popular issue in the media and among activists an easy target. People love to hate Capos.

**Jordan:** Even though they are the only regulated part of animal livestock which is interesting.

**Laura:** Exactly. So we're always keeping our eyes open for moves to try to further regulate livestock agriculture and keeping an eye on making sure that not only do our farmers have the chance to use good practices but that we're doing all that we can to keep them from being overly burdened with too many regulations and that'll be one of the things we'll be continuing to look out for in the future.

**Jordan:** Nice I guess one of the more off the wall questions I just thought about, so Detroit has obviously had a roller coaster ride or maybe he's been at the bottom of the roller coaster, but you

know some of the housing gets torn down, bigger lots a little bit seems like, a little bit more research at least from my advantage point of my urban gardening, maybe a little bit more agriculture coming into the city because there's little more space, do you guys touch any of that from Farm Bureau? Do you guys have anything that's popped up?

**Laura:** A little bit. There's a lot of really exciting things happening in Detroit. They went through a really hard time. The city itself declared bankruptcy. It lost over half of its population. Detroit's population peak was two million people now that now we're less than a million. So that not only erodes a lot of your tax base that would help to provide the city with them with the funding that it needs to keep running services but also means that you've got a lot of unmanaged property and a lot of infrastructure that's serving a lot fewer people and is less able to be maintained that's continuing to be a problem. But they're doing a lot of really great things. And our county farm bureaus who are in and around the Detroit area have been really taking a lot of leadership and running mentoring programs to help people who are using urban farming or urban gardening techniques using the community supported agriculture and you know in other initiatives that they want to try to get experience and to and to get some learning from active farmers who have been farming for a long time to be able to use good techniques and to have successful harvests when they're when they're operating. We have a great partnership with Eastern Market which is a very large farmer's market that's been operating in Detroit for a long time and they're great supporters not only of our stewardship programs but also of these mentoring programs that farmers are using. And then even the city itself has been making a lot of strides in trying to trying to be part of the solution for a lot of the water quality problems that have been happening. So they're not only starting a lot of green infrastructure projects they have the Southeast Michigan organization of governments that's the city of Detroit and all of the local governments in southeast Michigan that are doing a lot of those projects but then what used to be called the The Detroit Wastewater Treatment Plant and is now called Great Lakes Water Authority has been putting a lot of money a lot of investment and a lot of new technology in place for their wastewater treatment to really reduce the nutrients and discharges from their plant into the into the Detroit River and ultimately integrate into Lake Erie.

**Jordan:** Yes I guess I never thought about that until now so if you lose half your population was there wastewater treatment plant you know at least less funding but was it easier for them to handle that material or were they just so bad infrastructural that they couldn't handle it still?

**Laura:** Actually Detroit's Wastewater Treatment Plant doesn't just handle the city of Detroit. They handle all of south Michigan so nearly 40 percent of Michigan's population all runs through that same crazy water. I never knew that. They have water systems that run almost all the way to the city of Flint which is you know quite a distance across the state. And so their numbers of population that they've served have not really reduced because the people who moved out of Detroit some left the state. But a lot of them just moved further into the state and so they're still customers that same plan without paying into the system. Yes. So we've got between 3 and 4 million people who are still served by that single plant.

**Jordan:** That's crazy. So you know you mentioned Flint. How does that work into this whole situation? I mean obviously it's a very contentious issue across the board. How has that been part of like the agriculture rolled out or has it touched you guys?

**Laura:** Well it has a little bit. The problems with Flint and the issue of their aging water lines and the lead contamination that came in through the through the change in their water system. First of all you know it was a terrible tragedy that that happened and we and we had farmers who felt a great deal of sympathy for especially the children who were exposed to lead through their drinking water system. We had a number of farm organizations and local farm bureaus and commodity groups that donated milk and dairy products and fresh fruits and vegetables to the city of Flint to try

to help with that situation and to help provide what they could. So we really appreciated farmer's efforts there. From a management standpoint and from a, how do we improve our drinking water standard standpoint, our members pushed very hard in the legislature to get the state to push cities to be better asset managers to not let their systems get to the point where they were so badly mismanaged and so out of date that they would have problems like this. And that's actually part of a legislative effort that's going on right now that would create a fund through additional tipping fees that are at our landfills to then help put money back into the state that can go toward those cities who want to do a good asset management who want to improve their water systems and who want to use the resources available to make sure that their citizens are safe. We also now have a new lead and Copper rule that has lowered the allowable standard in drinking water systems and calls for more proactive testing. So ironically we're probably going to see a lot more stories and issues about lead being found in water systems because the standard is because less standards tighter and because we're doing a lot more testing now.

**Jordan:** That makes sense. I guess that's all I got for you. I appreciate you going all over the place for me because I have always with Detroit in Flint and you know all the different types of crops you guys have in Michigan, all the shorelines on record. I mean the recreation in Michigan, we get the Pure Michigan ads here. They are huge and it's a huge industry so I think you guys have even more heat on you from the tourism industry and everything so I really appreciate you taking the time to help explain that to me and hopefully some of the neighboring farmers that live up there that maybe don't know and appreciate your time.

**Laura:** It was my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

**Jordan:** That was Laura Campbell from the Michigan Farm Bureau. Please visit [ofbf.org](http://ofbf.org) if you have any questions or are looking for more information on some of the issues in Ohio farmers are facing. I'd also subscribe and rate our podcast on iTunes. Tell a farmer, bring a friend and spread the good word. Thank you.