PA VINES PROGRAM

PA Vines (Pennsylvania Vested in Environmental Sustainability) is a voluntary program that promotes self-assessment of on-farm operations in Erie County’s vineyards and provides a pathway for grape growers to access state funding that can offset the cost of installing agricultural conservation practices.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, Erie County Conservation District (ECCD) and their partners began this program in 2014 to reduce the amount of sediment and nutrient pollution entering waterways from the region’s approximately 10,000 acres of vineyards. While there are many other programs dedicated to advancing agricultural conservation, PA Vines’s exclusive targeting of this relatively small, but economically significant group of producers is unique. To participate, farmers complete a workbook that was created through a collaborative effort of Penn State Extension and Cornell Cooperative Extension. The workbook was designed to illuminate economic and environmental impacts of grape production operations and serve as an educational resource for farmers. This self-assessment contains 115 questions about on-farm practices that are divided into seven areas of agricultural management. Farmers score themselves based on their answers and can use the score to identify strategies for improving conservation outcomes.

Once the workbook has been completed the farmer becomes eligible to apply for the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection’s Growing Greener grant funds, which is administered by ECCD to offset the cost of implementing approved conservation practices. In addition to the educational and networking benefits of engaging with ECCD and completing the self-assessment, gaining access to this grant money provides a financial incentive for enrollment in PA Vines.

To date, PA Vines (Pennsylvania Vested in Environmental Sustainability) has successfully leveraged over $400,000 of state and federal funds to engage with Erie County Conservation District’s (ECCD) grape growing community and help install agricultural conservation practices that can reduce nutrient and sediment impacts to drinking water.

The program came into existence when the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Management and U.S. EPA co-funded the creation of the workbook in 2015. At first ECCD had a limited capacity to distribute the workbooks, help farmers create conservation plans and apply for grants, or install practices. In 2017, U.S. EPA provided ECCD with a $64,000 Great Lakes Restoration Initiative grant that allowed for the hiring of a part-time dedicated staff member to provide technical assistance to enrollees and generally oversee the program through the end of March 2019.

Since 2018, approximately 35 workbooks have been distributed, and nine self-assessments have been completed. The dedicated staff member has carried out over 40 one-on-one site visits with individual farmers and engaged hundreds more through agricultural industry meetings and public events. Roughly $36,000 has been awarded to enrollees through the Growing Greener grant fund, which also requires a 15 percent match from the landowner. Additional federal funding has also been leveraged to support practices that qualify for the Environmental Quality Incentive Program offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. So far, 495 acres of cover crops, 820 feet of stabilized access roads, one stream crossing, and four blind inlet/water collection structures have been implemented because of these funds and activities.
Vineyard in Erie County (PA VinES)

TYPE
Investment

ISSUE
Source Water

GEOGRAPHY
Pennsylvania