TRANSCRIPT

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EPISODE NAME: Vermont Crops, Soils and Pastures in the Wake of Tropical Storm Irene

Today on Across the Fence in the aftermath of Irene getting answers about the impact of flooding on fields feed and food. From on-site assessments to educational workshops there are major efforts underway to support rebuild and aid the recovery of the Vermont’s farming community. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I’m Judy Simpson. Information and resources are critical in the wake of the devastation caused by Irene. The partnering of state and local agencies along with the state university is providing key information at a time when farmers need it most. Across the fence's Keith Silva tells us more.

Cottonwood Stables is a boarding facility and cropping operation in Colchester. After hurricane Irene ... 190 of the 200 acres here were flooded.

Jeff Senesac: ‘totally underwater and all of my crop land. Enough to go canoeing [laughs] I’m not meaning to make light of it, but you kind of have to make light of it when you look at everything otherwise you cry. Now, in the heart of the harvest season, Senesac is figuring out what crops can be saved and what’s going to have to go as a loss.

Jeff Senesac //Cottonwood Stables: “I heard at one point that you weren’t going to harvest anything that was underwater and now they’re getting a little more realistic and it’s you know you’re going to have to be careful and it’s going to have to be tested or looked at, but it will probably be saleable because the beans were still in their pods the pods
were sealed up so it’s not going to be so much of an issue, but we are going to have to deal with a tremendous amount of dust when we harvest. There’s been talk of actually having to wear some type of respirator-type dust mask because of what’s going to be flying around when I harvest so it’s going to be a little more difficult.

Senesac is like many Vermont farmers affected by the flooding who has questions about what needs to be done now and in the months to come. That’s why the University of Vermont Extension hosted an educational workshop at Senesac’s farm to offer answers and to provide strategies for farmers from across the region.

Tom Kilcer is a retired agronomist from Cornell University who now runs a crop consulting business.

Tom Kilcer/Agricultural Consultant: “my experience is been when we have situations like this is A. not to panic, B. take a clear evaluation of it. You need to take a breath and step back, you just took a heck of a hit and you’ve got to pick yourself up and evaluate what you have. A corn field like this looked horrible when the water was up to my chest, but when you look at it now the majority of the feed here is very good condition yet so were still going to be getting a crop out of it. […]A lot of people get concerned about petroleum and other products, the interesting thing is petroleum floats, most of it goes downstream and so it tends not to stay on the vegetation it tends to wash off very easy it doesn’t stay with the plants. So that changes that equation pretty dramatically from people’s perception to the reality. The mud is not good, mud on any feed. You wouldn’t want to eat muddy lettuce or muddy cauliflower. Animals don’t like to eat mud either it’s not good to have them have a lot of mud in their diet. We look to see how bad is the mud contamination.

Mud means mold and mold leads to dangerous micotoxins that form inside crops.

Kilcer; “This is a good ear it was not underwater you can see there was no mud on it. The kernels are all filled out very nicely, there’s very few discolored kernels on it. This is an ear that got flooding, you can see the silt layer on the upper third of it, that means the upper third of it is contaminated with mud it’s contaminated with microorganisms.
There’s a pink spot here. A pink spot is a mold that produces micotoxin. One little kernel on an ear isn’t a concern, but if the whole upper third of the ear is showing that that is a very big concern.”

Determining what corn can be harvested or treated to destroy the micotoxins is too often a decision that’s not cut and dry.

Sid Bosworth//Agronomist. UVM Extension: “Some of the corn it’s pretty obvious, if it’s flattened, but there’s a lot of corn that in that grey zone, it’s silted, but if you tear the ears back they’re not molding, you know do you take it or not. [...] We’ve gone through floods in the past, but never to this magnitude across such a large area. [...] Even before this flood, we were in really tight forage crop supplies. Those farmers that often times have to buy additional forage, we’re seeing that those supplies were tight, prices were going up, and now this flood has exacerbated this issue, so I think that combination, it’s almost a perfect storm.

Pastures didn’t fare any better than forage crops ... which made it almost impossible for horse owners to graze their animals after the storm which only adds to an already tight market for feed.

Betsy Greene//UVM Extension: “If the pasture was underwater and you can see the dirt and silt, don’t use it don’t put your horses in it, it’s just too high a risk because the horses are not adapted to dealing with toxins or dirt or things like that and they could easily colic and then you have a much higher cost when you lose the horse. [...] You have to actually look at what you have as quality, and how many horses you have and calculate what you will need. And if you’ve lost hay if you’ve lost pasture that you were depending on, you need to talk to the people now, you need to figure it out, you need to go to your banker if you might need to get a short-term loan or something like that, because it’s much easier to forewarn them and to find the feed now than it will in February and March, it’s probably going to be high now, because there is a shortage, but it’s going to be much higher and much less available middle of winter.

The take home message at this meeting is one that’s being repeated all over Vermont: don’t hesitate to act or to ask for help.
Bosworth: “Pull in as many resources as you can to help in making decisions, you know, it’s not an easy situation by any means, but I’ve been really inspired in seeing how many people want to help, citizens, farmers, agencies, you know, and I think there’s been a strong concerted effort in this state to try to work together across agencies and I think if farmers can take advantage of that and of their veterinarians, and feed nutritionists and their bankers and just try to pull in as many resources to get ideas it always helps.”

Senesac: “I don’t really have the means to give advice to people because I only know what I deal with with my crops, but if you think you’re going to have a problem, contact your Extension service, your farm service agency. Have them come and inspect your crop, document it, at least get it in the works so that they know you had a problem because a lot of time, timely reporting of problems makes a lot of difference, for myself, you know, it’s going to be a wait and see. I may lose half my crop. Those beans may not be any good, but I’m not going to count ‘em out until I absolutely have to.

And nobody’s going to count out Vermont’s farmers or the service agencies like Extension that support farmers. In Colchester, I’m Keith Silva with Across the Fence.

Judy.: Thanks Keith. Joining us now is a key organizer of that workshop Betsy green of UVM extension thanks for being with us.

Betsy.: Glad to be here.

Judy.: So how was the workshop received?

Betsy.: It was great it was actually really neat because in addition to the farmers and students from Sid Bosworth's forages class we have folks from the agency of agriculture the NRCS other peers from ext. All these people the president of the farm bureau was even there. Everybody wants to find out the best information how to help everybody whether it's themselves and or others trying to get the best information to make the best decisions.

Judy.: I've also visited Jeff Senesac and his farm and he's going to have to wear masks when he harvests even in his tractor.
Betsy.: Yes absolutely because that silt and fine particles as you saw when you are out there is everywhere. That's dangerous when it's all kicked up and even in a tractor you still have its not airtight. The types of masks that you need to use changing them how to fit them properly all that stuff is really important because it's the health of the farmer and safety of them as well.

Judy.: Right and one of the things you discover as you go through this disaster are some of the aftermath issues.

Betsy.: Yes and trying to find out how to lessen the damage or not have any further damage to your own personal health and of course we have a lot of information on the web site on how to fit those. We actually have masks available at the extension office too so that's a great way that we can help folks try and be safe and prevent any further damage.

Judy.: What do we know about the Vermont farm disaster relief funding and how it's being distributed?

Betsy.: The first round has been distributed and it was over 300,000 that was distributed and I know for sure that there was a least one horse owner that had done the paperwork lied and applied and received grant funding to help with water lines and things that were unburied with Irene and it's something that the second set is being decided right now and then there's I think another set that will be applied for and that information I'm sure is on our web site as well.

Judy.: You told us previously about it equine grant for horse feed can you update viewers on that?

Betsy.: Yes the U. s decline disaster relief fund has been a great opportunity. I actually got a call from some folks that said do know people that need help. I can find that. So we arrange to get some feed and forage extender down to the Rochester area three towns there. Guys farming yard stepped up to actually delivering it and Poulin Grain stepped up and is donating an additional same amount plus more. I turned around and actually went back to get the second set of funds that I could to the Max so or actually delivering over seven times
to those three towns the horse owners and their needs so it's been a
great partnership for them.

Judy.: But there still a lot of people who need help.

Betsy.: Yes in fact I know the horse council is worked with folks from
Bethel, Stockbridge and all that but there's a lot of work still yet to be
done. There's a lot of help still needed whether it's volunteer cleaning
donations. Of course the hay issue you heard about. All of that stuff is
important and it's going to be a very long long journey back for a lot of
people.

Judy.: Are these people that have been affected pretty good about filling
out the paperwork or is part of the issue trying to get that word out to
them to contact your agencies?

Betsy.: That has been a challenge because sometimes people think it's
not that affects mate or I'm not eligible but you don't know. The fact is
if we get that paperwork filled out it can provide potentially more funds
from the Feds for Vermont in general so that right there will help our
state but then it also makes you potentially eligible for other grants
whether it's helping with the insurance because you documenting the
damage. You have to document that damage so it's hard to get people
to sometimes step up and say hey this is my land don't want to put this
out that if you want help we have to be willing to take help.

Judy.: The sooner the better too because this is going to be a long
recovery.

Betsy.: Yes absolutely and there are some deadlines at the end of
October for female work farm services agencies so it's critical even if
they haven't done it now they still can do this stuff and try and get
some help.

Judy.: The information is critical in and as you pointed out the
extension web site is a clearinghouse for all kinds of important
information. Can you give me some examples?

Betsy.: Yes in fact from that workshop we had we film some video clips
from the corn crop. You saw Tom Kilcer and there's a video clip on that
on the web site also on the horse pasture there are FSA, farm service agency forms there is just getting the masks where they're available all the locations the agency that grant information. All kinds of information on that web site.

Judy.: How about for people who are interested in volunteering? Is there any information that too?

Betsy.: The information for the volunteering is actually done on an individual basis because the case a little bit of work to find the right situation and have the work for the volunteers that they can do and the organized. It's actually more work than you sometimes realize that I know that Vermont response.org has been a clearinghouse for that and individuals an extension help organize as well.

Judy.: The big issues for people who have had damage even if they don't think it's as bad as what happened to their neighbor they should still go through the work and apply and get the paperwork done.

Betsy.: Absolutely. Also use the resources that are available and if you're cleaning out your four horse barn that you not a business you still can have access to those masks at the extension office and things like that so use the things that are available take advantage of them. This is a time when everybody has suffered a lot of damage so whether you feel you are the one hit worse or not there are things that are available for you and take advantage of them.

Judy.: Because winter is right around the corner and it's just going to be harder.

Betsy.: Yes it's certainly not going to be an easier.

Judy.: Once again the web site you want pointed out.

Betsy.: Yes is www.UVM.edu/extension and there is an Irene red bar that says Irene click on that.

Judy.: All right Betsy thanks so much for joining us today.

Betsy.: Glad to be here.
Judy.: That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on across the fence.

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