Discovery Farms Program Launched in North Dakota

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North Dakota has launched the Discovery Farms program to answer questions about the environmental impact of typical farm/ranch management systems. A Discovery Farm is a working farm or ranch. Its operators are cooperating with local, state and federal natural resource managers to demonstrate and evaluate the effectiveness of various production practices in reducing environmental impacts while maintaining farm profitability.

The Discovery Farms program is a cooperative effort of the core farms, North Dakota State University Extension Service, North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, North Dakota Department of Health and U.S. Geological Survey.

Intensive monitoring of runoff from cattle feeding areas on each Discovery Farm will document any environmental impact from typical livestock management practices. If impacts are identified, the producers will be asked to come up with ideas on how to deal with the issues. Whatever practice or facility alteration the producers agree upon will be installed and monitoring will continue to see if it is successful. Monitoring will take place on the farms for at least seven years.

Four livestock operations from across North Dakota volunteered to participate in the project. A steering committee of their peers from the majority of North Dakota farm, livestock and commodity organizations selected two of them to be the state's first core Discovery Farms. The selected participants are Kim and Denise Amann and their sons, Cody and Dusty, who operate a farm near Dazey, and Doyle and Patsy Johannes and their son, Matthew, whose farm is near Washburn. There will be three gaging stations, similar to figure 1, installed at each farm to monitor the runoff from animal feeding areas.

Figure 1. Gaging station to monitor surface water runoff

Very little of this type of environmental quality data has been collected on real-life operating farms/ranches across the country. North Dakota is the second state besides Wisconsin to implement this type of data collection. Monitoring equipment is being installed at each site this fall and data collection will start with the 2008 spring's snowmelt.