

Progressive Stewardship

Environmental Farm Plans are enabling producers to take proactive steps to ensure stewardship of their land and surrounding environment. This ever-growing group of producers is banding together to make a difference in water conservation, agricultural sustainability, and environmental management.

If only one producer made an effort to conserve water and energy and downplay their impact on the surrounding environment, no one would take notice. No far-reaching effects would be felt, and that one attempt at conservation would be largely in vain. But what if a whole group with a vision of stewardship, conservation, and sustainability could band together under one name – could they make a difference? Following the lead of Ontario, that's just what the developers of the Alberta Environmental Farm Plan have done, and so far, this fresh look at planning for the future has been well received by Alberta producers.

The Alberta Environmental Farm Plan (AEFP), launched in February of 2003, is a non-profit company geared to guiding producers through an environmental assessment of opportunities and risks on their operations. This assessment, once completed, is an environmental farm plan – a voluntary, confidential road map to mitigate risks and make the most of opportunities.

Creating a Plan

The process of creating an environmental farm plan is relatively simple, though in-depth. AEFP hosts two half-day workshops hosted by trained facilitators of the program. The first workshop provides an introduction to the program, discusses the concept of self-assessment, and provides the principles by which a plan is formulated. Producers receive a comprehensive binder complete with 23 modules on various topics, and delve into the creation of their plan. Facilitators are there to assist producers in establishing the base of their plan and pinning down factors unique to each individual operation.

John Kolk is the Chairman of AEFP, and he explains that the process of moving producers through the system has been working well. "We started with a pilot test involving 70 producers. We got some much needed feedback, and have since had 150 producers complete the second workshop." The second workshop follows one to three weeks after the first, giving the producer time to complete all modules.

"The second workshop is held to open up discussions on mitigation strategies, answer questions, and provide feedback on the program," says Kolk. Producers will then have a chance to finalize their plans on their own time and hand in their completed workbook to their facilitator. Finally, the plan is subjected to a peer review, and once approved the plan becomes a powerful tool implementing the required environmental stewardship strategies.

Although words like "mitigation strategies" may sound like



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they refer to major overhauls of existing systems, Kolk says that, in all honesty, many of the improvements made are small, but important nonetheless.

“Many times producers have said that what they’ve included in their plans were items on their ‘To Do’ list for quite some time. This program was the push to get them to act.” He says that a common area of focus is water quality and conservation, and improvements range from repairing riparian zones to spending \$6 on an anti-back flow protector. “The plan focuses on the big picture, but we don’t want to downplay how important spending the few dollars on a padlock for the chemical shed is to keeping your family safe,” notes Kolk.

An environmental farm plan is just that; a tool to create awareness of simple ways to decrease risks to producers, their families, their neighbours, and ultimately the environment. The workshops have an added benefit of linking producers with technical expertise to handle the larger projects, like building up wells or fencing off and protecting sensitive riparian zones.

On-farm Effects

From a producer’s standpoint, Kolk points out that on his own operation he’s certainly become more aware of his surroundings and his family’s potential to reduce Alberta’s energy and water use. “Going through this plan really made me stop and think; if I save five gallons of water twice a day and then all of my neighbours do the same, I’ve made a real difference. And if all of us who are making these changes do so under AEFP, we’ve marked ourselves as a group that are stewards of the Alberta landscape,” Kolk remarks.

The Research Connection

What the environmental farm plans mean to Alberta is two-fold. The changes producers make will add up to cleaner water, conservation of the soil, and decreased

energy demands. The awareness these plans have created goes a long way in educating decision makers, and could mean clearing of forests and draining of wetlands only when or if an environmental risk assessment proved it would be a sustainable practice.

Research into environmental management will benefit as well. As the number of producers creating plans grows, so too will the demand for more result-driven research. Producers will have more contact with the technical experts who are looking into new and innovative approaches to sustainable agriculture practices, and will be able to identify gaps and suggest what questions they want answered based on real life experiences.

It is important to note that environmental farm plans contain much of the information they do because of past research, and the intent is to constantly be incorporating new research findings as they become available. Work is being done in Alberta regarding best management practices and cost/benefit analysis, as well as extensive research into odour control technologies, water quality issues, and soil phosphorous capacities; all topics that have immediate and future implications as part of environmental plans.

Kolk sums up environmental farm plans best – this is a program that combines facets of adult education with the tools and the processes to satisfy producers’ desire for stewardship, connecting the information available with the people who can make a difference.

“Alberta’s agricultural industry is not the only benefactor. All Albertans benefit from the EFP through increased awareness and implementation of environmental issues and management practices. Some of these benefits include cleaner water, better care and management of livestock, reduced impacts on the environment, increased public confidence in our food supply, and improved confidence for local and international consumers & investors,” adds Judy Balombin, Agri-Industry

A Little Goes a Long Way...

If every producer saves just five gallons of water twice a day, multiplied by 365 days per year it equals 3,650 gallons. Expand that to include the approximately 53,000 producers in the province and, in one year, you’ve saved over 193 million gallons of water – enough to fill 214 Olympic-sized swimming pools!

Working Together

The AEFP initiative got its start back in April of 2002, when a team of industry and government stakeholders got together to collaborate on a proactive approach to mitigating the impact of farms on the environment. The program is funded by the Agriculture and Food Council of Alberta - CARD Program, the Agriculture Environmental Stewardship Initiative, Alberta Environmentally Sustainable Agriculture Council, and Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. CARD is a granting agency for agricultural initiatives that benefit Alberta’s agricultural industry as a whole.

Development Officer with the Agriculture and Food Council - CARD Program.

Kolk is heartened by the reception the farm plans have received. “We have quite a few producers who are waiting on their peer review, and they’re excited about moving forward. There is an overall feeling of satisfaction once you’ve taken those first steps in joining ranks and pushing forward towards a common goal: a more sustainable and environmentally sound Alberta.” **r&d**

