



Media Release

Demand for Program Funding Shows Farmers' Environmental Commitment

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By Lilian Schaer, for the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

The Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) has long been a popular program but when the annual cost-share funding for 2009 was fully allocated in just over two months, program representatives were both surprised and pleased at the demand.

One of the things driving the uptake of cost-share is the awareness that is developed through the EFP process. Since the launch of the third edition of the EFP in 2005, more than 11,000 farm businesses have attended workshops, developed EFP action plans and had them deemed appropriate through peer review. The results are a more environmentally informed sector, eligible to apply for cost-share funding to support environmental improvements on farms.

The Canada-Ontario Farm Stewardship Program (COFSP) was launched this past spring as the new cost-share component of the EFP program. Both EFP and COFSP are funded through Growing Forward, supported by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) under the Best Practices suite. EFP helps farmers to identify and improve environmental conditions on their farms.

“This is a good news story for farm environmental stewardship”, says Murray Cochrane, President of the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA), which delivers the program. “The strong demand for cost-share funding shows the tremendous willingness on the part of farmers to be proactive and build on a strong environmental legacy by undertaking on-farm improvement projects.”

More than 1,800 projects by 1,100 farm businesses have been approved for cost-share funding of approximately \$7.4 million in the first year of COFSP.

Overall, the most popular project category is precision agriculture, with 215 approved projects to fund global positioning systems. This is followed by 194 projects in the improved cropping systems category, which provides funding for modifications to seeding and fertilizing equipment such as no-till drills or planters.

“We are seeing many projects related to improving management of inputs and soil through the implementation of global positioning systems and improved equipment,” says Cochrane. “These systems lessen the environmental impact of crop production while at the same time letting farmers use their inputs more precisely, which helps cut costs.”

Rounding out the top three is a category dedicated to habitat management with 170 different projects covering everything from establishing buffer strips and alternative livestock watering systems to constructing fencing to protect environmentally sensitive areas on-farm. Although this category has consistently been near the top of the popularity list, Cochrane says this is the first time it made the jump into the top three, which he attributes at least in part to a companion program.

“The Ministry of Natural Resources provided some extra funding to protect wildlife habitat through The Species at Risk Act, so this really helped encourage projects in this category, which is a real

good news story," he says, adding that improvements like putting up fencing to keep cattle out of creeks or rejuvenating creek beds help develop corridors that keep wildlife away from crops.

Cochrane completed a wildlife project on his own farm that involved fencing off his creek and installing an alternate water source for his beef cattle, and in addition to environmental benefits, he's also seeing positive results in his animals.

"The cows have been doing much better since they're no longer drinking out of the creek and have access to a consistent source of clean, quality water," he says.

Field crop producers lead all agricultural sectors with 575 approved projects under year one of COFSP. Most fall under the precision agriculture or improved cropping systems categories, but improved pest management is also proving to be popular. This is not surprising, says Cochrane, given both the rapidly rising costs of crop protection products and the increasing public scrutiny being directed towards their use.

The dairy sector ranks number two with 386 funding allocations. Leading the way for dairy farmers are improvements to manure storage facilities and handling equipment. This is followed by funding for resource planning, which involves securing the services of consultants to help with planning for nutrient management. Another key project area of dairy farmers involves energy conservation, which typically includes heating and ventilation upgrades, energy use assessments and modifying farm machinery for biodiesel use.

Beef farmers, both feedlot and cow calf producers, have the third largest number of approved COFSP projects with 336. The most popular category for this sector is the upland and riparian area habitat management, which includes grazing management, improved stream crossings for livestock and wetland restoration among others. Manure run-off control and water well management were numbers two and three respectively on the beef sector project list.

Project application forms for year two of the program (2010) are not yet available. Farmers interested in securing funding for a new proposed project are advised to wait for funding approval from OSCIA Guelph before they start a project or they risk not qualifying if their project doesn't meet the set timeline criteria of the program.

According to the OSCIA, farmers invest two dollars of their own money for every dollar the government spends on cost-share funding for on-farm environmental improvements, making COFSP an important contributor to rural economic activity. In light of the strong demand from the farm community, the government has initiated a review of COFSP to ensure that the program continues to meet industry needs, a move supported by the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

"The willingness of farmers to utilize this program has been demonstrated over and over again," says Bette Jean Crews, President of the OFA. "There is no question in our minds that if the program budget grew, there would be plenty of farm businesses eager to take advantage. Farmers are responsible environmental stewards and their interest and commitment will benefit all Ontarians."

The EFP and the COFSP are administered by the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, acting on behalf of the Ontario Farm Environmental Coalition. The Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association is the program delivery agent to agricultural producers.

For more information about COFSP and cost-share funding opportunities, farmers are encouraged to contact the OSCIA office at 1-800-265-9751 or their local OSCIA Program Representative. Information is also available online at www.ontariosoilcrop.org.