



## **Media Release**

### **Rotational Grazing: Good for the Cows and Even Better for the Birds**

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*For immediate release*

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The cheerful melody and bright yellow and white markings of the Bobolink are a friendly reminder of spring for many farmers. Returning annually from their South American over-wintering site, this grassland songbird has adapted to take full advantage of the meadows and pastures provided by Ontario's agricultural landscapes for nesting and feeding their young.

Despite the seeming abundance of this species (with approximately 300,000 to 400,000 breeding pairs in the province), Bobolink populations have declined dramatically in recent years, with estimates indicating a 50 percent reduction over the past ten years alone. As a result, the songbird has now been designated a species at risk in Ontario, triggering protection under the Endangered Species Act. The Act prohibits killing or harming a designated species with protection extending to the prevention of damaging or destroying given habitat. This restriction could be alarming news for producers who rely on forage and pasture lands to support their livelihood.

A temporary exemption came into effect on June 3, 2011 that allows agricultural activities to continue during a three-year transition period while more research is conducted into what is placing the bird in peril. Additionally, this timeframe allows for the development of both short and long-term approaches to Bobolink protection on the agricultural landscape.

The Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) is working with partners to develop a better understanding of grazing management techniques that favour grassland birds. Initially, OSCIA has had to look no further than the farm of the organization's current president-elect, Joan McKinlay, who lives with husband, James, on Silver Springs Farms, situated in the picturesque hills of the Niagara Escarpment near the Town of Blue Mountain in Grey County.

Although the McKinlays have expanded their operation over the years to include cash crop production along with traditional cow-calf, hay remains their primary commodity. Biodiversity has not been the primary focus of the farm, but these producers have always felt that the abundance of wildlife species is an excellent barometer of the overall health of their property. As a result, they are very pleased to see a wide variety of bird species annually, including Bobolink.

"Farmers are good conservationists and if you work with them; they will happily work in partnership," insists James McKinlay, commenting on the interaction between wildlife and agriculture. "We have been pleased to partner with several organizations over the years and feel we have benefited from each others' views." The McKinlays have been actively engaged in environmental conservation for many years, as recognized through the distinction of being chosen for the Canadian Cattleman's Environmental Stewardship Award in 2001. However, the operation's commitment to excellence extends well beyond stewardship, as James McKinlay has also been granted the Ontario Pasture Award in 2011, was named Ontario Forage Master in 1993 and went on to win the American Forage and Grasslands Forage Master's award in 1994.

Through keen interest in innovation, the McKinlays have always tried to embrace new techniques and practice continuous improvement. With approximately 150 cows and their calves to support, focus on good quality forage is a necessity. Long time proponents of the rotational grazing system, Silver Springs used concerns over limited feed availability during a particularly droughty year as the impetus for further subdividing pastures, transitioning to this progressive pasture management style.

“The system has to fit the people,” says James when reflecting on various alternative management practices. The McKinlays currently use a combined system of extensive and intensive rotational grazing in connection with centrally accessed supplemental hay and water to provide the optimal balance between livestock nutrition, land maximization, cost effectiveness and stewardship.

Within a rotational system, production value is optimized by dividing large fields into small parcels where cattle are systematically moved from field to field, allowing time for proper plant re-growth. OMAFRA Pasture Specialist Jack Kyle suggests that when implementing this system effectively “there will be significantly more forage for your livestock”. Controlling access to portions of the pasture ensures fields are not overgrazed, allowing proper nutrient replenishment to the roots and optimized plant re-growth. Additionally, productive pastures significantly increase gain, providing positive economic returns for the farm business.

The extensive rotational grazing system adopted by the McKinlays appears to be a factor in creating ideal habitat for grassland species like the Bobolink, as the grass in some individual pastures remains tall in height and is grazed more evenly. Protective cover shields nests from predators until young birds are strong enough to venture off on their own in July. Here it seems that what’s good for the farm truly is good for the birds too.

With keen attention toward pasture management and a delicate balance between art and science, cattle are rotated through the system to manage forage quality and meet the dietary requirements, being careful to ensure that lands are never grazed too tightly and that there is adequate rest for pastures. Through clever construction this team has managed to develop a system to ideally suit their needs. Careful to match herd and pasture size, the McKinlays generally expect cattle to remain within a given field for 3 to 5 days, allowing ample rest for each field to ensure plants are able to rebuild. James notes that “rotational grazing works no matter what size your farm is, allowing for dramatic increases in production”. Additionally, significant rest periods between grazing activities allow wildlife to take full advantage of pastures, bolstering the availability of grassland habitat. Overall, rotational grazing offers a means of optimizing existing land to achieve a delicate balance between natural habitat enhancement and strategic production decisions for the farm.

The McKinlays are emphatic. “The largest populations of bobolinks are found in cow-calf grazing areas. These producers are obviously doing something right to support bird populations. Let’s work together within the existing systems to enhance their habitat while supporting the agricultural producers that provide it.”

Rotational grazing is one of many best management practices supported by the Species at Risk Farm Incentive Program (SARFIP) offered by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and the Government of Canada and delivered through OSCIA. Details are available at [www.ontariosoilcrop.org](http://www.ontariosoilcrop.org) or by contacting your local OSCIA Program Representative.