



Environmental Farm Plans: An Ontario Farm Community Initiative

By Mary Wiley

Five hundred farmers in seven areas of Ontario will begin filling out Environmental Farm Plans as part of a pilot project beginning in 1993. The seven areas - Essex, Oxford, Huron, Niagara North, Hastings, Russell and Timiskaming - were chosen to reflect the broadest possible range of agricultural production and geographic diversity in the province.

The Environmental Farm Plan project, like the Grower Pesticide Safety Course, represents Ontario farmers' proactive approach to agriculture environmental issues. Through the release of "Our Farm Environmental Agenda," early in 1992, farmers defined seventeen key areas of environmental concern to agriculture. By completing Environmental Farm Plans, farm families will be able to take a holistic, in-depth look at the environment on their farm, noting areas of potential environmental risk and identifying simple solutions tailored to their operations.

Who is putting the Farm Plans together?

While the final say on the content of the Environmental Farm Plans is reserved for the Ontario Farm Environmental Coalition - the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario, AGCare (Agricultural Groups Concerned About Resources and the Environment), and the Ontario Farm Animal Council - government agencies have provided welcome support for this farmer-driven effort. The Ontario Ministries of Agriculture and Food (OMAF), the Environment, and Natural Resources have devoted a great deal of staff time to compiling the technical information included in the Farm Plan modules.

Financial support for the 1993 pilot project is provided by Agriculture Canada. In addition, former Agriculture Minister Bill McKnight committed five million dollars of federal Green Plan money, over the next five years, to extending the Environmental Farm Plan process beyond the pilot stage. An

additional seven million Green Plan dollars will fund individual farmer initiatives to reduce environmental risk and research needs identified by farmers through anonymous data from completed Farm Plans.

What will Environmental Farm Plans look like?

The Environmental Farm Plan document includes several modules. Farmers will fill out only those sections that apply to their own operation. The modules use a series of four statements which describe and rate various degrees of management as "Best," "Good," "Fair" or "Poor." Farmers will select the statement which best describes their situation. If the rating is "Poor" or "Fair," the farmer will propose a realistic (economical and practical) solution to the problem. In some cases, the proposed solution may only slightly reduce the risk, but must meet the requirements of a "Good" rating. Any steps taken to reduce environmental risk are seen as a positive outcome of the Environmental Farm Plan process.

The modules have been edited by a "Plain Writing Consultant," so that they are very easy to understand and complete. The modules include:

Farmstead:

- Site Evaluation
- Well Water Condition
- Pesticide Storage
- Fertilizer Storage and Handling
- Petroleum Product Storage
- Farmstead Waste Management
- Household Waste Water Treatment
- Agricultural Waste Storage
- Livestock Yard Management
- Silage Storage
- Milk Centre Washwater Management
- Farmstead Air Impacts

Field Level:

- Soil Management
- Nutrient Management (Mineral)
- Nutrient Management (Organic)

- Horticultural Crop Management
- Field Crop Management
- Pest Management
- Stream, Ditch and Floodplain Management
- Water Efficiency
- Wetlands and Associated Fish and Wildlife
- Woodlands and Associated Wildlife
- Energy Efficiency

How will farmers fill out the Farm Plans?

Farmers or farm partners wishing to fill out Environmental Farm Plans will begin by attending a half-day workshop designed to familiarize them with the farm planning process and explain environmental risk assessment. They will then fill out the applicable modules on their own, with the assistance of drop-in workshops with OMAF technical staff and farmer members of the local Soil and Crop Improvement Association. If warranted by local level demand special technical sessions will be set up consisting of tours or issue-specific instruction.

When a farmer completes his or her Environmental Farm Plan, it can be reviewed by the Peer Review Committee of the local Soil and Crop Improvement Association to assure that the modules were understood by the participant and the most practical solutions have been identified.

The only copy of the completed Farm Plan will remain in the possession of the farmer. Simple, anonymous statistics, based on the completed Farm Plans, will be recorded on a county by county basis by the local Peer Review Committee. These statistics will help farm organizations to identify high-priority needs for research into environmental risk reduction and financial assistance to put high-cost solutions in place.

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