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Farmers working to save environment

By **STUART JOHNSTON**
 Staff writer

Recognizing that environmental mistakes have been made in the past, Halton farmers are now making a coordinated effort to ensure that the environment is well protected and maintained.

Halton Agricultural Advisory Committee (HAAC) reps Harry Brander and Peter Lambrick outlined to regional councillors last week an ambitious new program that farmers throughout the province are undertaking to preserve the environment.

Stressing that farmers consider themselves "as the first environmentalists," Brander explained that now the agricultural industry will be following formal strategies to help solve current environmental problems.

"We are always concerned with the environment - we work with nature, the soil, water and air, which all boils down to our livelihood," Brander said. "If we do a poor job looking after our land, it hurts our bottom line...We are stewards of over 14 million acres of land in Ontario, (so) our goal is to maintain the environment in the most favorable condition as possible. We want to treat our soils right, and we don't want to contaminate our water. We need a healthy environment which is basic to sustainable agriculture."

Ontario farmers recently completed a comprehensive report entitled, "Our Farm Environmental Agenda," which outlines farmers' renewed attitudes about the environment, and ways they should conduct their business to protect it.

Brander noted that farmers' "roles have changed over the years," from just mass producers of food to "rural land managers as well as efficient producers of food that compete in world markets."

Because of the pressures put on farmers in the 1970s to produce mass quantities of food, Lambrick admitted that excessive amounts of fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals were at times used, but the use of such substances has been dropping over the last few years.

"Farmers are admitting that they made mistakes over the last 20 years, that the chemicals used were excessive in response to public demands," Lambrick added. "But, this (report) is the agriculturalists' response to it...We'd like to tell the public that we are going to do our bit to preserve the environment."

A generic plan of action for farmers en masse to follow is not the direction that they are taking. Rather, each farmer will develop his own strategies to protect the environment that is tailored to his individual needs.

"A lot of the efforts will be voluntary, (but) some things will be mandatory," Brander said. "We're hoping to put about 500 plans in place initially by the end of the year. We'll look at the results to see if they are relevant, simple and if farmers will favor them. Each plan will be individual for that person's plot of land, because no one knows that land better than he."

One initiative, Brander noted, is storing manure on concrete pads, instead of directly on the ground. In that way, nitrates will not seep into the ground and find its way to the water table. Instead, the nutrients will be "contained and retained" on the pad, which benefits the farmer and the environment.

Halton's planning commissioner Rash Mohammed said he favored the farmers' agenda, and promised to report back to council on its merits. He noted that he "liked the recognition of the new environmental standards," adding that it appears that "farmers are responding to these changing standards."

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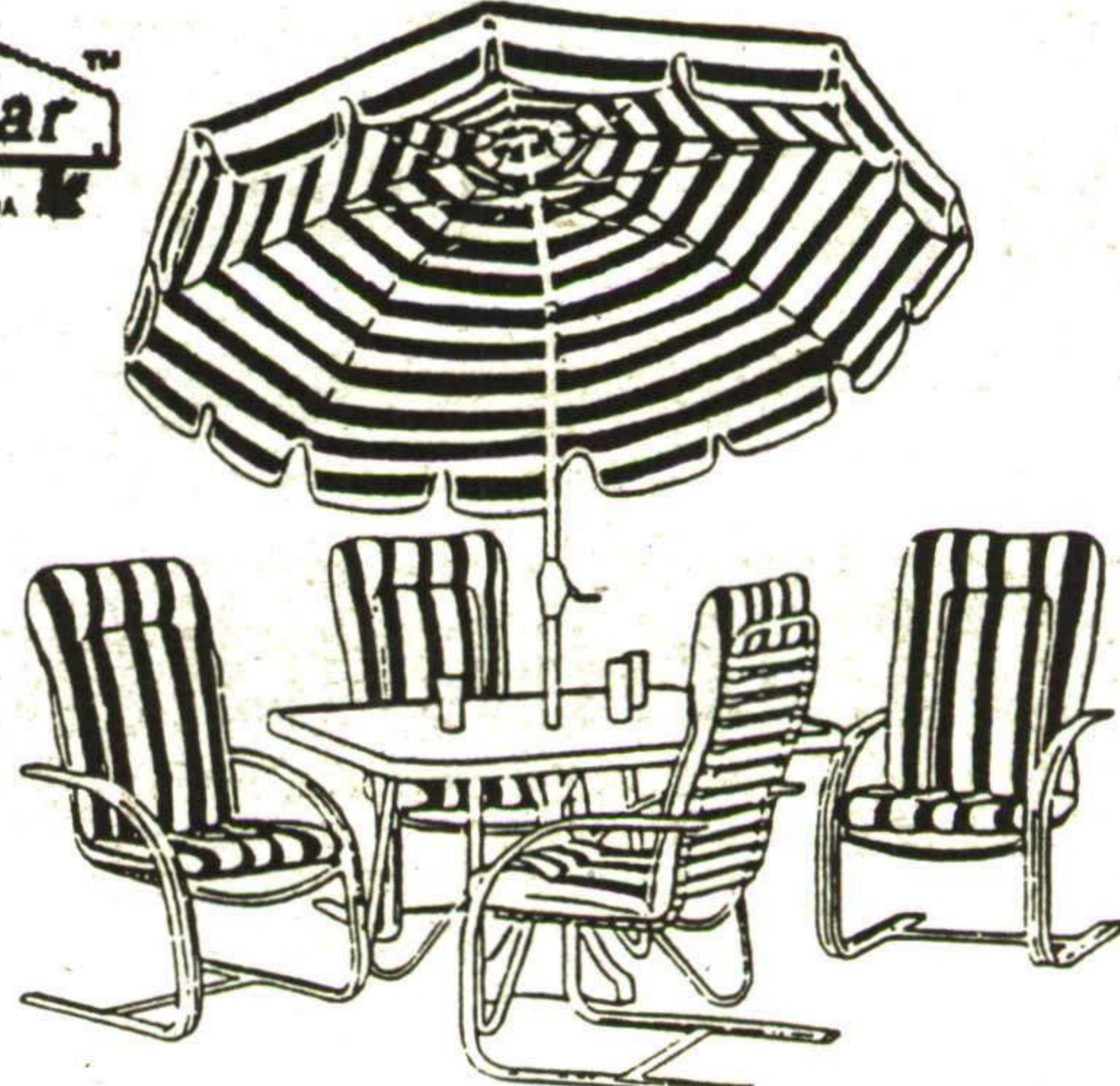
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