

Farmers grab reins to protect York's water

With financial help, they're working to avoid another Walkerton disaster

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
Staff Writer

York Region farmers Jim Williams and Dennis and Dan O'Hara are one step ahead of the rule makers.

In a bid to prevent another Walkerton-style tragedy, the provincial government has unveiled a plan to stop water supplies from becoming contaminated by manure.

Mr. Williams and the O'Hara brothers didn't need any arm twisting to take care of business. Mr. Williams, a beef farmer, and the Schomberg dairy-farming O'Haras lock up their manure in the winter, ensuring it doesn't leak into nearby sources of drinking water.

One thing is for sure: Mr. Williams and the O'Hara brothers are not going to be like the Walkerton-area farmer who found himself linked to seven E coli deaths.

With Walkerton as an example, the province has adopted a "never again" approach and is putting new legislation in place.

A province-wide consultation process linked to the Nutrient Management Act is about to begin in York Region, said Oak Ridges MPP Frank Klees.

"I'm inviting the (provincial) minister of agriculture to a meeting this fall," said Mr. Klees. "We'll explain what's in store for stakeholders."

The farming community and the municipalities will play an important role in the discussions.

Once the Nutrient Management Act is in place, Queen's Park will not only be able to keep a sharper eye on what a farmer can do on his or her land, it will lower the boom if the law is ignored.

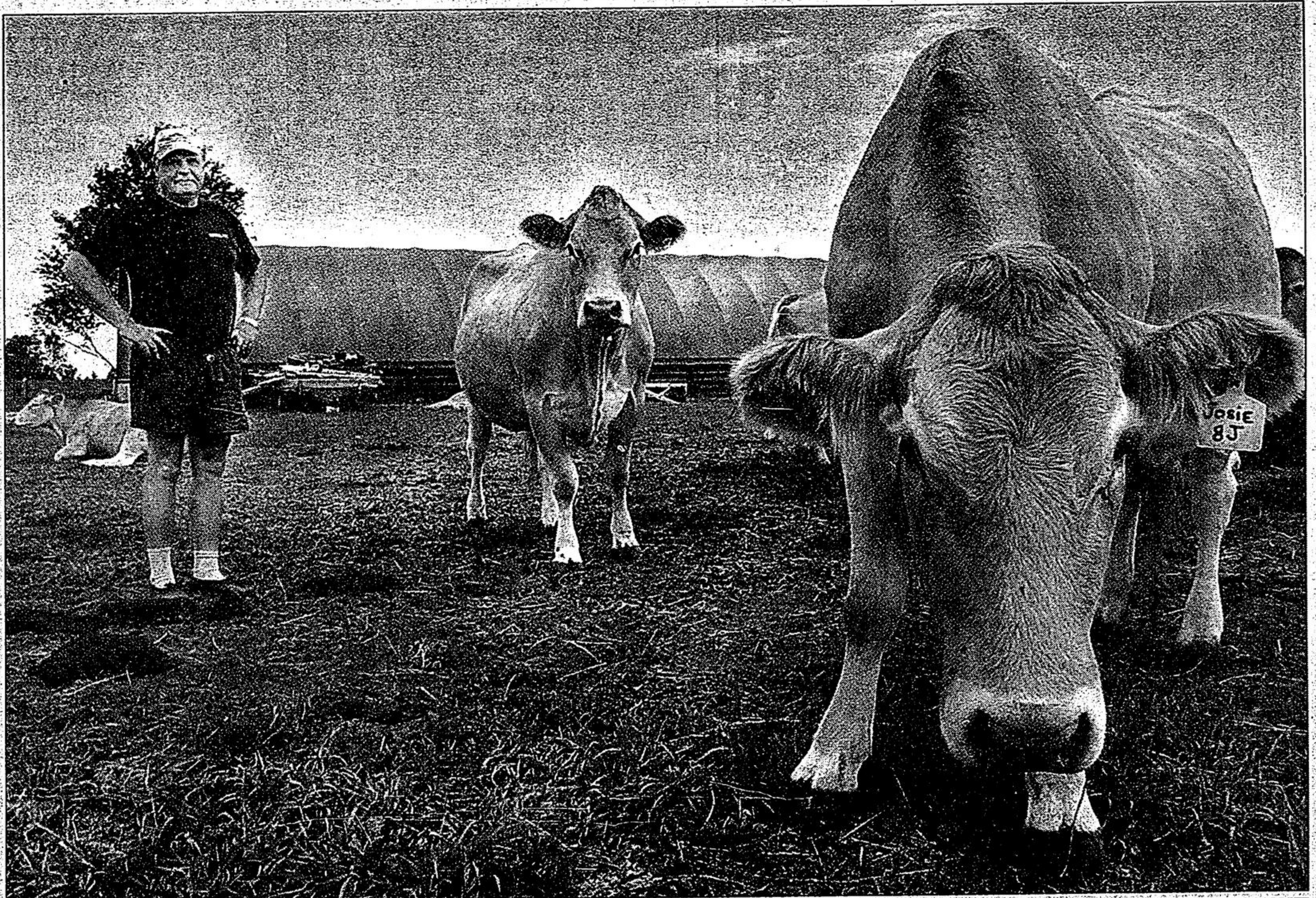
Where barns can be built, how manure is to be handled and how wells are to be dug will all be part of the regulations, Mr. Klees stressed. A penalty will be included, he added.

When Mr. Williams bought his 145-acre farm in Georgina three years ago, he carried out an environmental inventory.

Concerned about the state of his well, he took measures to bring it up to proper standards.

"I repaired the well and then looked at the manure situation. The ground on my farm sloped. I knew there would be a problem with manure runoff."

With a \$6,000 grant from the Landowner Environmental Assistance Program (LEAP),



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Georgina farmer Jim Williams has erected a manure storage area (in background) which helps protect the water table and preserve nutrients in his manure. The structure isn't cheap, but a \$6,000 grant from an arm of the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority eased the financial pain.

administered through the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, Mr. Williams built a 35x80-foot combination manure/hay barn.

The structure holds manure from his 40 head of cattle in the winter and hay in the summer and fall.

"Because of runoff, farmers are discouraged from spreading manure in the winter," Mr. Williams pointed out.

Manure-spreading in the winter is of little or no benefit to the next crop because much is lost to leaching.

And what's left on the soil surface is lost to the air as ammonia.

Because of the sheer size of the O'Haras' dairy operation — 180 head of cattle, including 75 Holsteins — the brothers knew they were dealing with a serious manure situation.

They also knew that in York Region and surrounding areas, they were in a position to take a leadership role in stopping contaminants from entering Lake Simcoe.

'Yes, farmers are concerned about the cost,'

Mr. Klees agreed.

'We don't want this to become a hardship situation.'

To ensure their 100-acre farm and 500 acres of rented land aren't a threat to the environment, the O'Haras installed a \$64,000 circular manure/milkhouse waste storage system at Dandy Lane Farms,

on the 11th Concession in King Township.

The cement structure is 115 feet across and 12 feet high and paid for with the help of a \$15,000 LEAP grant.

The decision for Mr. Williams and the O'Hara brothers to invest in a waste storage system was born out of a sense of responsibility. "We all have to do our part," Mr. Williams said.

Under the Nutrient Management Act, all farms across Ontario would be bound by the same curbs on waste.

Farmers are not strongly opposed to the regulations. For the most part, they see the need, said Mr. Klees.

"Farmers in York region are positive about the legislation," he said. But for those not interested in abiding by the new rules, the province will notice.

"But I think farmers want to do the right thing," said Mr. Klees.

Additional expenses created by the Nutrient Management Act are, however, expected to be a priority with the farmers, especially during the government's consultation period.

"Yes, farmers are concerned about the cost," Mr. Klees agreed. "We don't want this to become a hardship situation."

"We have to look at what's available in terms of assistance. I'm hoping for good practical advice from the agriculture community."

Mr. Williams is welcoming the consultations.

"The government definitely needs more input from farmers," he said.

"We'll take a close look at this. These regulations might be too restrictive."

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