



## Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

1 Stone Road West, 1st Floor, Guelph, Ontario N1G 3A7

Toll: 1-800-265-9751 Tel: 1-519-826-4214

[www.ontariosoilmcrop.org](http://www.ontariosoilmcrop.org)

### **Farmers supporting grassland bird habitat through the Grassland Stewardship Program**

By Lilian Schaer for Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 11, 2017

Growing up, Ellen Cottrell remembers a small grassland bird called the bobolink being a common sight on her family's rural Ontario farm. That's no longer the case – the striking song bird that depends on hayfields and pasture for breeding habitat is now a species at risk in Ontario.

That wasn't something she became aware of though until her local conservation authority asked if she and her husband Dean would be interested in participating in a grassland bird study being conducted by Bird Ecology and Conservation Ontario (BECO).

"Nottawasaga Conservation Authority asked if we'd be interested in allowing people to watch our fields to see if we have these birds on our property and to observe what happens during the normal process of taking off hay," she said.

The Cottrells farm 100 acres in Simcoe County just west of Alliston, where they have a 100-ewe sheep flock, raise a few cattle for freezer beef, and grow their own forages.

The BECO researchers arrived on the Cottrell farm before haying season last year to watch the birds, identify their nest locations, and as haying began, observe their behaviour as the nesting area became disturbed – all with the goal of determining how to best protect breeding bobolink.

According to Ellen, some of the birds moved to an uncut area nearby, and the researchers asked if they'd be willing to hold off on haying that four-acre plot of land until after July 15 to give any fledgling birds a chance to leave their nests.

The Cottrells agreed, and were able to secure some cost-share funding for the project through the Grassland Stewardship Program, delivered by the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) as part of Environment and Climate Change Canada's Species at Risk Partnerships on Agricultural Lands initiative.

The program provides cost-share funding of up to \$20,000 per farm business for implementation of five Best Management Practices (BMPs) that play a key role in maintaining healthy grassland bird habitat while helping to sustain farm production and profitability.

For 2017, the Cottrells are expanding their delayed haying practice to 50 acres in a field where they know many grassland birds like to nest, and they're appreciative of the cost-share funding to help them do so.

According to Ellen, the delay in haying impacts forage quality through lower protein content, and they likely won't be able to get a second cut of hay off that field. This means they'll have to supplement their rations with extra grain and potentially buy in some hay.

"That's where the funding will certainly help us. I'm an environmentalist and I want to protect the birds – and we may find down the road that we can do this anyway, but for this first time, the funding is a real win-win for us," she said. "I'm hoping to see fledglings this year and see that the population has benefitted from us not cutting. This will aid in the repopulation of these species."

The program also provides cost-share for pasture rejuvenation and control of encroaching trees and shrubs through mowing, two BMPs that improve habitat for the bobolink. The bobolink prefers grasslands with very few trees, high grass to legume mixes, and tall dense vegetation. Miles Yang implemented both these BMPs on a 125-acre farm south of Smiths Falls he bought last year to start his beef herd.

The land hadn't been used for a number of years under the previous owner and was overgrown with weeds and shrubs. It was at an Environmental Farm Plan workshop in Kemptville that Yang learned about the Grassland Stewardship Program. Through the program he was able to receive cost-share funding to rehabilitate 30 acres of pasture in 2016.

This year, he plans to introduce a rotational grazing system and increase the size of his beef herd.

"The farmstead was not managed for a long time, and this has made a large area of grassland available for grazing cattle, increasing the number of animals the land can support sustainably," Yang said.

As someone new to farming, the funding was critical as it helped him complete the rehabilitation work more quickly and remove some of the uncertainty around working with land that had been unmanaged for a long time, he added.

Native grassland restoration and rotational grazing BMPs also qualify for cost-share under the Grassland Stewardship Program. To be eligible for the program, farm businesses must have a valid Premises Identification Number and a third or fourth edition Environmental Farm Plan and Action Plan verified complete by OSCIA in the last five years.

There are no set cost-share rates; applicants must identify the total cost of a proposed project and their cost-share funding request in their application. The next program intake is open from April 10 until May 1, 2017. More information is available at [www.ontariosoilcrop.org/oscia-programs/sarpal/gsp/](http://www.ontariosoilcrop.org/oscia-programs/sarpal/gsp/).

The Grassland Stewardship Program is part of the Species at Risk Partnerships on Agricultural Lands program in Ontario, an Environment and Climate Change Canada initiative. Funding is provided by the Government of Canada.

-30-

Media contact:

Laura Van Vliet, Programs Analyst  
lvavliet@ontariosoilcrop.org