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Media Release

Celebrating 25 years of success:

Ontario's Environmental Farm Plan has driven fundamental change in practices, program delivery

For immediate release
April 11, 2016

Prepared by Lilian Schaer for Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

Guelph – The Environmental Farm Plan (EFP), one of Ontario agriculture's flagship programs, is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

The EFP, which has been adapted across Canada and its workbook shared with more than 30 countries, provides training, self-assessment, and action plan development for 23 environmental areas on and around the farm and outlines best management practices.

Since EFP's inception, over 40,000 Ontario farm businesses have voluntarily participated in almost 3,550 educational workshops, resulting in a total estimated investment of \$390 million in on-farm environmental improvements, supported by associated incentive programs.

According to the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA), which administers EFP and its related programs, government has contributed approximately one-third of that total and the remainder has come from farmers themselves and other funding sources. Studies have confirmed that many additional environmental projects have been completed without any off-farm funding support.

“The success of the Environmental Farm Plan is a remarkable accomplishment for the Ontario farm community and the government partners that have supported the program for the last 25 years,” says dairy farmer and OSCIA President, Gord Green. “As we mark National Soil Conservation Week April 17 to 23, this an achievement we can be proud of because it truly shows that Ontario farmers are environmental stewards who take their commitment to soil, air and water seriously.”

Farmers driving environmental change

EFP's origins can be traced back to action taken by farm organizations after reading political signals being sent by Ontario's newly elected government in 1990, remembers then-OSCIA Program Manager, Harold Rudy, and the concern farmers felt over the prospect of proposed new environmental regulations.

“The farm leaders of the day got together to develop ways and means to address these concerns proactively,” explains Rudy. “It was suggested that we in the industry come together and define the environmental agenda as we move forward, which we did.”

They developed *Our Farm Environmental Agenda*—key was a recommendation that every farm complete an Environmental Farm Plan. A special committee was set up to define the criteria and lay the ground work for what eventually became the EFP: a workbook, supporting workshop, and a local verification process for the action plans developed through the process.

“The criteria were that we wanted to define best practices, offer farmers a self-directed, voluntary and confidential adult learning process to assess conditions on their own farms, and also to recognize that many farms had already achieved a high level of compliance on the environment,” Rudy says.

But it also had to allow farmers to identify opportunities for environmental improvement and build an action plan to address environmental concerns through a one-window, co-ordinated approach. A steering committee of farm leaders and a working group of farm and government leaders and interest groups were created as well as operational committees to take the plan forward.

Rudy credits Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) staff at the time for providing technical expertise and working closely with the farm community to make EFP a reality and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada for helping to finance program development.

At the onset, the only financial incentive delivered through OSCIA for farmers to make on-farm environmental improvement was \$500. That was soon increased to \$1,500 if farmers could match a project to an identified goal in their EFP action plans.

In 2005, incentive programs took a considerable jump, offering \$30,000 and more per farm business to help implement action plan projects. More recently, the funding model has shifted towards various merit-based approaches where projects that most closely align with specific program objectives and typically provide the greatest environmental benefit are the ones receiving preference for cost-share support.

And although the early vision suggested success, the program has far exceeded everyone's expectations.

EFP goes national

The Atlantic Provinces were the first to develop a similar workbook document after Ontario launched EFP, followed by Alberta; comparable programs are now in place across the country.

“That was the beginning of a national process and the federal government has been very supportive of EFP over the years through federal-provincial agreements including the *Agricultural Policy Framework*, *Growing Forward* and *Growing Forward 2*,” Rudy adds.

Efforts are now underway to harmonize EFP structure and delivery through a single national program standard, with a steering committee established to build consensus on how to move forward.

Surpassing expectations

Lindsay-area beef farmer Robin Brown has been teaching workshops farmers need to complete their EFP action plans—environment, food safety and Growing Your Farm Profits (GYFP) which focuses on farm management – for almost a decade.

And although cost share funding is important, due diligence and learning how to take proactive instead of reactive action is a key reason Brown says farmers come to the EFP courses. Networking with other farmers, becoming familiar with regulatory requirements and Best Management Practices, and being able to access resources are also important.

“I helped OSCIA administer a survey several years ago where we asked farmers to pull out their EFP action plans and tell us what they had done with them. The big “a-ha” for me was the incredible number of projects farmers did on their own without ever receiving cost share dollars,” she says. “That supports the intent of the EFP.”

In recent years, Brown has started seeing a more diverse crowd of workshop participants representing organic and conventional as well as conservation-focused agriculture.

Best management practices around fuel and manure storage and water well management continue to be as popular, but there's been a shift away from funding to encourage Global Positioning System technologies because they've been so widely adopted by farmers, illustrating how EFP can drive change.

“Farmers are very proud of what they do and when I'm asked to go out for a site visit to a completed project, it is a rewarding experience. I have the privilege of seeing the end product of their efforts in implementing on-farm improvement projects that were identified in their action plans as a result of attending an EFP workshop. Often, the cost share funding dollars and technical advice available helped facilitate a more meaningful and effective project,” she adds.

Milestone accomplishments

Rudy points to two significant milestones that helped solidify the program in Ontario agriculture. When the provincial government provided substantial cost share funds for livestock and poultry farms to implement required changes under the Nutrient Management Act, a completed Environmental Farm Plan was a pre-requisite to receive support. A completed and verified EFP is now mandatory for all farmers to access environmental funds under the federal-provincial *Growing Forward 2* programs delivered by OSCIA.

And close to a decade ago, the EFP model was used as a template to develop the Growing Your Farm Profits (GYFP) workshop when farm leaders realized that although business planning was always considered to be the right thing to do, uptake and participation by farmers was considered weak.

“GYFP’s layout and process is a parallel program to EFP that deals with financial planning, farm succession, issues around labour, and the social implications of farming,” Rudy says. “If you’re looking at sustainability in the broadest sense, this program focuses on the economic and social side of sustainability.”

A stepping-stone to sustainability

And sustainability is where farm, food, and value chain leaders today see the continued evolution of EFP. Twenty-five years after their first manifesto, they’ve release another, called *Farm, Food and Beyond: Our Commitment to Sustainability*, and are using it to help prepare farmers and the food value chain for meeting emerging sustainability requirements.

Dr. Gord Surgeoner, who led the original EFP efforts a quarter century ago, is chair of the new Sustainable Farm Coalition steering committee, which recognizes people, planet and profit as the three pillars of sustainability –first identified as social, environmental and economic pillars in the Brundtland Report called *Our common future* issued by the United Nations’ World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987.

“This new project demonstrates our commitment to people, our planet and profitability. Just as was the case with the EFP, which has served Ontario agriculture so well for 25 years, we want to create a system that reduces redundancy, is farmer-friendly, and provides a platform that will serve for another quarter century,” says Surgeoner.

The new coalition’s goal is to establish criteria for creating sustainable farm and food plans in collaboration with farmers, processors and others in the value chain, and seeks to encourage harmonization with existing sustainability efforts already in place.

That’s a big task, admits Rudy, but the outcome will have implications nationally and internationally due to Canada’s status as a global food exporter.

“Ideally, coalition leaders would like to see one whole farm plan that makes it easier for producers, food processors and retailers to deal with documentation, verification and certification where justified. That’s a long term goal and vision for where we’d like to see the industry go,” Rudy says.

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