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Media Release

Conservation Authority partners with farmers to improve water quality

For immediate release

By Lilian Schaer on behalf of Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

Guelph, Ontario

Farmers and the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority have joined forces to help improve water quality in the region.

A unique funding opportunity, called the Priority Subwatershed Project (PSP), provides farmers with cost share support to implement Best Management Practices (BMPs) related to measurably improving soil health and water quality. The end goal is to identify the cost of agricultural stewardship to reduce phosphorus entering local water courses.

PSP is part of the Great Lakes Agricultural Stewardship Initiative (GLASI), which is delivered by the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association. Funding for GLASI is provided through *Growing Forward 2*, a federal-provincial-territorial initiative.

The project is specifically targeted at the Upper Medway Creek subwatershed, chosen in part because it's been identified as a higher phosphorus contributor to the Thames River, according to Michael Funk, Agricultural Soil and Water Quality Technician with the Conservation Authority.

As well, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada already had some existing water quality research in the area, allowing Upper Thames to build on existing data and infrastructure.

Since the program's launch in 2015, 16 landowners have received funding to support 33 projects on the ground, said Funk.

"That number grows when you look at number of people involved in outreach. Our landowner tailgate meetings have garnered quite a bit of interest," he explains. "People who haven't applied for funding are still involved, so the message is being heard."

Farmers can access 80 per cent cost share for on-farm projects to a maximum value of \$75,000 per eligible farm business. Qualifying BMPs address erosion potential, nutrient loss, reductions or improvements to nutrient application, and improving overall soil health.

The program was deliberately designed to encourage broad participation and Funk is pleased with the program's progress so far. The BMPs that have seen the most uptakes in the subwatershed area are conservation tillage, phosphorus management, and cover crops.

"Those three are exactly what I was hoping to see, a trifecta that sets the phosphorus in the ground and limits the risk of nutrient runoff and soil loss over the winter months," he says. "More growers are going towards placing phosphorus right into the ground, planting cover crops and reducing tillage, which reduces the potential for runoff."

Jeremy O'Shea grows corn, wheat, soy, hay, and dry beans in the Granton area north of London. He began transitioning to minimum till and no till practices three years ago and jumped at the chance to access some cost share funding to experiment with cover crops.

"We were considering trying cover crops but having the funding gave the nudge needed to pull the trigger," he says. "There are risks with trying something new and changing the way you do things, and it's nice to have some help when you're trying new things."

O'Shea experimented with interseeding cover crops into corn last year, but the dry conditions kept the crop from growing. He had better luck with an oat, rye, crimson clover and pea mix after wheat, and says the extra bit of cover was effective at holding the soil in place after heavy rains this spring.

"We want to find the balance between doing what's right for the future of our soils but we also need to remain profitable or else we won't be able to look after those soils in the future," he says. "But I like how the soil has stayed in place and how the water has stayed clean – that's what you want."

The partnership with the Conservation Authority has also proven invaluable, with O'Shea adding it's been a great experience meeting with staff and having their presence in the agricultural community.

"That's the thing that needs to happen more in ag, strategic partnerships with communication between the partners – that's how we can make change happen," he believes.

Funk echoes these sentiments, explaining that these small-scale projects allow for beneficial one-on-one conversation, but also admits that Conservation Authority staff has learned that reducing phosphorus from agriculture is a complex issue.

"Every land owner will have a different road to reducing phosphorus loss on the farm, wading through their rotations and equipment limitations to come up with their own plan of action," he says, but adds their soil sampling shows farmers overall are doing the right things in the subwatershed.

"With our soil sampling, we found no real hotspots in the watershed that we could pinpoint as high phosphorus sources," he says, which indicates an overall solution may require small effort from many farmers across the region.

Funding is still available for projects in 2017 and the Conservation Authority will continue monitoring water quality in the area this year for detectable changes from the projects already in place through the program.

“We recognize that change is difficult for many landowners, and it can be a daunting step, but while there is funding available to adopt practices, we encourage landowners to take advantage of the last year in the program,” Funk says.

More information is available at <http://www.ontariosoilcrop.org/oscia-programs/glasi/priority-subwatershed-project/>.

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