



ONTARIO SOIL AND CROP IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

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OSCIA survey reveals surprising relationship between farmers and species at risk

By Katie Burt for the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

In 2013, the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) conducted a survey of producers to get a read on attitudes towards species at risk. The process yielded some surprising results; more than half of participants (69%) acknowledged that SAR loss is an issue in Ontario.

Other statistics pulled from the survey data include:

- 62 percent of producers indicated they care about protecting SAR
- 57 percent responded they would feel “pleased”, “proud”, or “lucky” to find SAR on their property
- 86 percent felt that the public is unaware of how SAR presence affects farming operations
- 78 percent felt farmers carry more of the burden for protecting SAR than private land owners

“It’s always good to gauge progress,” Andrew Graham, Executive Director at OSCIA says. “We think the activities of Soil and Crop over the years have been effective at getting the attention of landowners in a constructive way and motivating them to take action at benefitting species at risk. We can convince ourselves that’s happening, but a well thought out survey including a respectable number of producers is a great way of getting a broader read on whether we are in fact gaining ground.”

Graham believes there are two important conclusions about the farming community that can be drawn from the survey’s results.

“First is that they do care about species at risk and are willing to take action where reasonable and practical. Secondly, and it’s no surprise to us, is the result that 86 percent of those surveyed felt the public is unaware of how the presence of SAR effects farming operations and 78 percent of farm respondents think farmers carry more of the burden. That is a very clear signal to organizations such as ours as well as conservancy and government groups, that there is work yet to be done.”

The work that OSCIA and other groups is undertaking incorporates four basic components that will lead to adoption of Best Management Practices (BMPs) on the farm. They are all designed to mitigate impacts on water, species at risk or soil erosion. The first is solid education. “Farmers are no different than the rest of us,” Graham explains. “They have to understand what the issue is before they are in a good position to take informed action.” Graham elaborates that demanding adoption of new BMPs is

not effective without an understanding by the public of what that could mean for farming operations.

His second component is the BMPs themselves. In order to be encouraged to improve farming operations, there needs to be proven, science-based BMPs available, especially since what works on one farm might not work on another.

The third is financial assistance. Funding gives the farming community the impression that the public is willing to come to the table and offer motivation for making established investments in BMPs. “Species at risk are important to all of us, there is no question about that, but producers cannot be expected to carry the financial burden of their protection alone.” Graham says. “Therefore, financial incentives are needed to entice them.”

Last is regulation, which Graham insists should never be the first tool used to drive big changes in the agricultural community. “To the credit of the government agencies we’ve been working with, they have developed a whole new plan to address the issue and though regulation is still in the toolbox, it is the stewardship card they are playing first,” Graham shares. “Combined with efforts from organizations like ours, we’re starting to get positive outcomes like [the results within this survey] that we can share with the farming community.”

The sample size of the survey was 250 contributors made up of past environmental program participants, OSCIA members and the broader agricultural community. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forests (MNR) provided funding for the survey.

The 2014 offering of the Species at Risk Farm Incentive Program (SARFIP) is broadly available to Ontario farmers. SARFIP is a cost-share program dedicated to on-farm projects that benefit species at risk and is currently accepting applications for up to 80 percent cost-share for BMPs that benefit species at risk.

A full report of the responses to survey questions can be found at www.ontariosoilcrop.org/en/programs/resources.htm.

Founded in 1939, OSCIA is a non-profit organization focused on the responsible economic management of soil, water, air, and crops. OSCIA works with commodity groups and producers across the province to provide producer education, local association development, program delivery and consumer outreach.

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