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Media Release

On-farm projects to improve Lake Huron water quality

For immediate release

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

Guelph, Ontario

Local landowners and Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority are working together on a program to improve water quality in the Lake Huron coastal watershed.

The Priority Subwatershed Project (PSP) provides landowners in the Garvey-Glenn and Gully Creek subwatersheds with cost share funding to implement on-farm Best Management Practices (BMPs) that boost soil health and water quality.

Community interest was high and work has been underway in those two areas since 2008 to understand nutrient enrichment in the tributaries, according to Mari Veliz, Healthy Watersheds Supervisor at the conservation authority, providing a solid base from which to build on.

“In a smaller ecosystem you can begin to examine cause and effect a little better,” Veliz says. “This is a land use issue - how intensively we can use the landscape and still have an environment we enjoy.”

Through PSP, eligible landowners can access cost share of up to 80 per cent for to a maximum of \$75,000 per farm business. Program criteria were deliberately broad to encourage widespread participation, says Veliz, requiring farmers only to have farmland in the watershed, and Farm Business Registration and Premise ID numbers.

Applicable BMPs focus on cover crops, soil amendments, erosion control, retiring marginal lands, contour and strip cropping, conservation tillage, phosphorus management, crop or field nutrient management plans, field windbreaks or wind strips, buffer strips, drainage water management, and innovative actions.

Landowner response has been very positive, according to Veliz, with almost all farmers in the area working with the conservation authority. Projects relating to erosion, water and sediment control were popular in the past, but there is a stronger emphasis on phosphorus management equipment in the current program.

Harrison Burgsma is a third generation farmer who runs a cash crop, hog and broiler operation on 820 acres near Dungannon with his wife, mother, and young children. The University of Guelph grad had been contemplating a switch from conventional plowing and spring cultivation to no-till when he heard about the program – and saw it as an opportunity to move ahead with trying that change.

During his first season, he was able to secure cost share to make no-till-specific modifications to his corn planter, such as adding attachments to allow for easier planting through higher residue cover and installing fertilizer openers that let him band phosphorus directly into the soil at planting.

Although there was a bit of a learning curve with the new technology, Burgsma says the fertilizer openers worked very well and yields from corn planted no-till after soybeans were comparable to those from conventional tillage.

“Water flowing into Lake Huron at the Garvey Outlet runs across our land in some spots, so making sure that phosphorus is banded underground is important to me,” he says.

Burgsma has also added yield monitoring technology to his combine that will give him harvest data to overlay with his planting data to identify problem areas in his fields. It’s his first step towards variable rate fertilizer use, which allows for precise placement of nutrients only where the soil needs them.

He’s also been experimenting with cover crops to protect soil against wind erosion and keep moisture in the ground. Burgsma planted a rye grass, brassica and turnip mix last fall after soybean harvest that did very well, and although he had less success with seeding annual rye grass and clover into standing corn last year due to lack of rain, he plans to repeat that trial in 2017.

“Funding gives you incentive to try some of these things. It’s not that we wouldn’t have been able to do it without it, but we might have gone at a slower pace,” Burgsma says. “The funding has allowed us to make a lot of changes and I don’t expect we’ll be going back to previous management styles.”

Cost share support is still available for projects during 2017 and Veliz encourages landowners in the watershed to consider applying.

“As we do more projects, we can start to see patterns. Monitoring is very important; that, in the long run, is what will tell us whether we’re making the differences we want to make,” Veliz says. “It’s a complicated issue and it takes everyone working together to try to address it.”

“And it’s important to recognize farmer participation in the process,” she adds.

“We recognize the funders, but farmers also make a contribution. They put their own money out first even though it is a cost share program,” she says. “And they sit down with me to go through cropping practices and talk to me about what they’d like to do in future, which takes their time and resources.”

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

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

803 words

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