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For immediate release

Norfolk County couple implements SARFIP rotational grazing BMP

By Lilian Schaer for the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association



It is estimated that there are fewer than 200 adult American Badgers in Ontario, mostly in the counties along the north shore of Lake Erie. Dana and Bryan Bonney's beef farm in Norfolk County near Tillsonburg is home to some of them, which they first learned when they were contacted by Josh Sayers with the Ontario Badger Project. It's part of an initiative out of Trent University that is radio-tracking badgers in the province in an effort to learn more about, and hopefully conserve, the species.

In addition to a 70 head cow-calf herd, the Bonneys also grow about 120 acres of hay on their farm, which had been used mainly for growing cash crops before they bought the property. The sandy, loamy ground had been depleted over the years, so they're working with rotational grazing to help bring back organic matter in the soil – a technique that is also helping the badgers living on their property.

The SARFIP program helped them implement a rotational grazing system with temporary fencing on their farm that can be moved around the fields and allow the cattle to graze in different areas. Along with it, they were also able to install a watering system to support their rotational grazing approach. Without watering tanks in the fields, they wouldn't be able to make it work, says Dana.

“Rotational grazing helps our land and the forage crop. It is not typical to have beef cattle in this area, so we are pioneers down here in some of these techniques,” she says. “Bryan put tanks in the fields for the cattle which lets us keep the livestock moving around in different fields. From a management stand point, it's next to impossible to provide water on a daily basis without the tanks, which is a huge obstacle this project helped us overcome.”

The badgers moved onto their property during the farm's cash crop days, and Dana says the way they've set up their fencing systems still allows the badgers to move around between their different dens while keeping the cattle away from their habitats – and the badgers away from the cattle.

"They were there before us and we've just fenced around the areas where their burrows and tracks are. Farming and badgers go really well together," explains Dana, adding the small carnivores move around frequently and can roam in a large radius. "We have a spring fed creek on the farm that never freezes and those natural habitats are one of the main reasons they're here. Farming is nice for nature and all the subdivisions everywhere take that away. We have two kids and we want to show them respect for nature."

Their rotational grazing efforts aren't just helping the elusive American Badger. Bryan says there has been a large increase in the number of birds and small mammals using their farm now, and he sees a lot of bald eagles and snowy owls.

"There's not a lot of grassland and rangeland in this area with all the crops being grown and urban encroachment, so there's not a lot of habitat for a lot of these critters in this corridor," he says. "Profitability in the beef industry is pretty important but once you've participated in SARFIP, it creates a lot of environmental awareness too so agriculture and nature can work well together."

SARFIP is a cost-share program delivered by OSCIA and funded by Environment Canada and the Ministry of Natural Resources. The program aims to help farmers adopt Best Management Practices (BMPs) to enhance the farm operation, while supporting local species at risk, improving forests, grasslands, wetlands and wildlife.

To be eligible to participate in SARFIP, Ontario farm businesses must have a completed Environmental Farm Plan (EFP). Candidates can then select eligible BMP categories from the SARFIP list that relate to an action identified in their farm's EFP Action Plan.

SARFIP has been renewed for the 2014-2015 cropping season. Potential applicants can view a program brochure and download the necessary applications on the OSCIA website at www.ontariosoilcrop.org/programs/species_at_risk.htm.