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Media Release

Farmers, conservation authority spearheading water quality improvements

For immediate release

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

Guelph, Ontario

Farmers in Essex County's Wigle Creek subwatershed are working closely with the local Conservation Authority to help improve water quality in the region.

The algae bloom in nearby Lake Erie has made phosphorous reduction a key priority, according to Katie Stammer, Water Quality Scientist with the Essex Region Conservation Authority. She credits local cash crop farmer Henry Denotter with helping to bring a Priority Subwatershed Project (PSP) to the Wigle Creek area.

Funded through the Great Lakes Agricultural Stewardship Initiative (GLASI), the project offers eligible farm businesses up to 80 per cent cost share to a maximum of \$75,000 to establish specific agronomic and soil health Best Management Practices (BMPs) on the land they farm.

"We want to show what we are doing and what we can do to reduce phosphorous levels through BMPs and Henry was a big advocate for this program coming to our region," said Stammer.

To date, almost half of the 30 farmers in the watershed have launched on-farm projects in the subwatershed. Wigle Creek was chosen for the program because it is representative of the greater Lake Erie watershed area: cash crops grown on Brookston clay soil, flat topography, and high in-stream phosphorous concentrations.

Projects involving cover crops, in-field erosion control structures, conservation tillage, phosphorous management and crop nutrient plans have been particularly popular. Through a partnership with the local co-operative AGRIS, for example, nine farmers have completed five-year crop management plans for their land and most of the watershed has been grid soil sampled.

Funding has also gone to support new equipment purchases by farmers, including strip tillers and technologies to incorporate fertilizer into the ground or do variable rate nutrient application.

Denotter, who has about 450 acres in the subwatershed area, feels that ensuring fertilizer is placed in the ground is an excellent way of keeping phosphorous out of water courses.

He used PSP funding to help buy a new fertilizer and seeding air cart and then worked to modify it for better performance and integrate it with his existing equipment.

“The air seeder helps control the fertilizer placement because it’s all going directly into the ground,” he explained, adding that he also used the program for cover crop trials. “The funding has been a big help.”

And he’s pleased with the outcomes to date – strong plant root systems, good earthworm populations and marbled earth are signs that soil health is improving.

His farm often serves as host to twilight meetings and farmer information sessions, as well as tours led by Grain Farmers of Ontario, Farm & Food Care and others so people can see conservation tillage and 4R nutrient use strategies (application at the right source, right rate, right time and right place) in action.

“I’ve learned from other people over the years and I enjoy the networking and having people coming out to look at what we’re doing and asking questions,” Denotter said. “And we need grassroots involvement in these types of initiatives.”

For Stammler and the Essex Region Conservation Authority, a significant benefit of the project has been being able to build positive relationships with local farmers. The organization has an agricultural technician on staff, but the water quality staff members aren’t farmers, so being able to learn from local landowners who are has been invaluable.

“It’s very beneficial for us to have more on the ground knowledge and get a better understanding of what we’re asking them (the farmers) to do, their challenges, and why they may be hesitant to do something – it’s mutual respect building,” she said. “People who aren’t farmers have to understand the risks of what it takes to do BMPs.”

Funding is still available for projects in 2017, the final year of the program. Eligible BMPs include cover crops, alternative phosphorous application practices, crop and field nutrient management plans, drainage and water management, buffer strips and conservation tillage.

To participate in the program, eligible landowners have to be willing to share historical land use data for their fields in the area, including crop types and yields, fertility and tillage practices, and field characteristics like drainage, tile spacing or soil sample results.

“We’d love to see more people try cover crops or complete a crop management plan, for example,” Stammler said. “It’s also a good source of funding to help buy equipment.”

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

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