



FARM MANAGEMENT CANADA  
GESTION AGRICOLE DU CANADA

# Acquiring Environmental Allies Increasing the Adoption of Environmental Stewardship Practices by Ontario Landowners

Executive Summary



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## OVERVIEW

As societal pressures around environmental stewardship increase and Canada has set ambitious targets for achieving its environmental outcomes, the agricultural sector will continue to come under the spotlight for its role in environmental sustainability. While environmental stewardship is practiced by many primary producers and recognized as a necessity for the sustainability of the sector's natural capital, participation in environmental programs remains relatively low, especially in Ontario. Industry associations in various production sectors have created sustainability assessment frameworks for their members to measure and work towards desired environmental and social goals. Meanwhile, many agricultural retailers including McDonalds, Cargill and McCain are now requiring producers to prove they adhere to environmentally sustainable practices before buying their products, and recently, the Government of Canada announced plans for participation in the AgriInvest government-matching savings program to hinge on demonstrable environmental practices. There is not only an environmental, but also an economic incentive for producers. Now more than ever, environmental practices are inherently linked to more than just environmental outcomes.

Management experts and scholars view sustainability through the triple-bottom-line, recognizing there is a balance between achieving environmental, economic and societal or social goals. Government and Industry will benefit from recognizing and promoting the triple-bottom-line to primary producers to help increase the adoption of agri-environmental programming.

The research results captured in this report help identify opportunities and mark a path forward for the Ontario government and other industry stakeholders to support Ontario landowners who have not shown an interest in environmental stewardship programs.

## OBJECTIVE

This research synthesis and literature review sought to improve our understanding of how landowners in Ontario who do not participate in environmental stewardship programs could be engaged to participate and improve the environmental stewardship of their lands by studying the adoption of environmental stewardship practices in other jurisdictions and farm business management best practices.

## RESEARCH METHODS

To achieve the research objective, the research team used a variety of methods to gather information, including, but not limited to:

- Internet Keyword Search
- Grey Literature Research
- Industry Meetings and Event Participation
- Interviews with Environmental Program Specialists
- Review of Provincial/Territorial Environmental Farm Plans, and other Agri-Environmental Programs, and Support Programs



## KEY FINDINGS

The research team discovered three (3) key focus areas for creating the path forward: Policy and Programming, Communications Strategies and Tactics, and Addressing Research Gaps.

### Focus Area 1: Policy and Programming:

- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's next agricultural policy framework, the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership (SCAP) program, comes into effect on April 1, 2023, focusing on agri-environmental practices as key to helping Canada meet the Government of Canada's goal of net-zero emissions by 2050.<sup>27</sup>
- The EFP program is Ontario's primary method for engaging producers in agricultural environmental stewardship,<sup>6</sup> however participation rates are much higher in other jurisdictions across Canada with Ontario ranking in the middle of the pack for farms with an EFP.<sup>50</sup>
- The Ontario-EFP ([electronicefp.com](http://electronicefp.com)) is being used by post-secondary institutions in food and agriculture courses.
- Producers report environmental benefits along with financial benefits as a result of implementing an EFP.<sup>8</sup>
- Cost-share programs are available to help implement action plans and increase adoption of environmental practices.
- The most common motivators for participating in EFP programming was funding (94% participated to access cost-share funding) and education.<sup>8</sup>
- Financial benefits were shown as a motivating factor for adopting environmental and business practices.
- Adoption of agri-environmental stewardship programs, such as the EFP, can have non-environmental benefits to the farm business as part of the triple-bottom-line approach to sustainability.
- The EFP and Growing Your Farm Profits (GYFP) program work in harmony to help producers assess and improve their environmental and business practices.
- Industry is demanding demonstrable sustainability practices resulting in an increase in industry-lead programs, and some are incorporating the EFP and other frameworks including outcomes beyond environmental benefits into their requirements.
- Confining sustainability policy and programming to environmental outcomes limit industry's capacity to reach sustainability goals.
- Cross compliance between the Government's business risk management (BRM) and agri-environmental programs would be burdensome to an already complicated suite of programs and ineffective as the level of payment would be the biggest leverage over the actual environmental benefit.<sup>24</sup>
- There is an opportunity to acknowledge and reward producers who have a comprehensive risk management or business plan that includes the triple-bottom-line components of sustainability.

### Focus Area 2: Communications Strategies and Tactics:

- Environmental stewardship does not appear to be more prevalent in any one commodity over another - although certain industry groups (such as dairy, beef and potato) are requesting more formal adoption of best management practices to prove sustainability to consumers and buyers.<sup>8</sup>
- Ontario's EFP is marketed primarily as a tool for mitigating environmental risks<sup>9</sup>, and not as a proactive measure in ensuring continued business success and achieving societal or social outcomes.

- Sustainability can only be achieved when farms are successful in all three areas - environment, economic, and societal outcomes.
- Promoting the triple-bottom-line to sustainable farming is an approach that recognizes the connection between people, profit and the planning required to position the farm for continued success.
- Communicating the linkage between the three (3) pillars of sustainability (the triple-bottom-line) to Ontario landowners could increase adoption of environmental practices as economic and societal benefits are acknowledged and realized.
- A number of other provinces and territories are promoting the benefits of adopting an EFP beyond environmental outcomes to entice producers to complete the program.
- Farmers who implement farm business practices to proactively mitigate risk and uncertainty for their operation are less likely to feel stressed by the unpredictability of the agricultural sector.<sup>43</sup>
- There is a positive correlation between the adoption of business management practices to environmental stewardship and societal wellbeing.
- Producers under the age of 40 were more likely to use social media sites at least weekly, and more producers are visiting websites from their phones. Several reports indicate social settings (agri-environment clubs, friends, or family), are also effective means for farmers to learn about and implement EFPs.<sup>8,49</sup>

### Focus Area 3: Addressing Research Gaps:

- Information relating to Ontario landowners (and landowners in other jurisdictions) who have not or have only occasionally participated in government or other agri-environmental programs to determine the tools, information and communication tactics and strategies to encourage participation could not be obtained through the course of this research.
- Research relating to landowners including producers who have participated in EFP programming to measure the impact of the program and opportunities for improvement could not be obtained through the course of this research.
- Research investigating environmental, economic and societal impacts of EFP best practices could not be obtained through the course of this research.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The research reveals a number of opportunities for Ontario to increase the participation of landowners in agri-environmental programming. The recommendations derived from this research are presented in three (3) distinct categories: Policy and Programming, Communication Tactics and Strategies, and Future Research.

### Policy and Programming Recommendations

The EFP as a free workshop and tool for farmers is an excellent starting point for Ontario's landowners to evaluate their environmental stewardship. It can be difficult to change behaviour, especially when asking landowners to go above and beyond established management practices. Provide evidence of measurable impacts including environmental and non-environmental results. Incentives matter and removing barriers to participation is essential to increase adoption of environmental stewardship practices.

1. Continue to use the EFP as a flagship program for environmental stewardship in Ontario and encourage industry to integrate the EFP as the environmental module within sustainability frameworks and programs
2. Enhance the EFP to align with other compliance standards – ex. Farm Sustainability Assessment, Potato Sustainability Alliance, etc.

3. Enhance the EFP to include emergency preparedness and disaster response to respond to immediate threats while promoting proactive risk management.
4. Work with schools and training institutes to incorporate the EFP into academic curriculum at all levels
5. Consider EFP program eligibility requirements that may be preventing access to the program (ex. having Farm Status)
6. Create a version of the EFP for Ontario landowners who do not farm the land themselves
7. Integrate participation in the EFP program into Ministry sustainability and climate change action programming including funding and cost-share available for skills development, peer groups, advisory support, and implementation of environmental practices for individual producers and non-profit organizations
8. Instead of cross-compliance, pursue incentive and/or financial reward programs (access to funding, tax incentives, etc.) for producers demonstrating environmental stewardship through the EFP
9. Create a mechanism to better measure EFP program participation, implementation, and impacts (ex. implementation of action plans, benefits realized (environmental, economic, and social), and opportunities for improvement)
10. Address known barriers to EFP adoption in other jurisdictions including access to program information, awareness of funding and other support opportunities, concerns with compliance and follow-up responsibilities including time and implementation costs, and concerns with confidentiality and public disclosure
11. Include farmers and non-farming landowners in a review of the EFP and any associated environmental compliance requirements to understand and rectify barriers to participation – cost, time, infrastructure, etc. and preferred communication and delivery methods
12. Establish a link between the EFP and Growing Your Farm Profits to support a more comprehensive approach to managing risk and reaching sustainability goals (including environmental, economic and social outcomes)
  - a. Reinstate cost-share funding for skills development, advisory support and implementation of beneficial management practices beyond environmental practices
13. Create decision-support/investment tools to help producers and landowners assess the benefits and return on investment for adopting environmental practices
14. Revise the EFP to track and show improvements over time making it easier for farmers to review and revise as environmental practices are implemented.

### Communication Tactics and Strategies Recommendations

Sustainability means different things to different people. Likewise, success is defined in many ways and depends on many factors, not just environmental outcomes. People also have unique learning styles and rely on many different sources of information to assess risk and opportunity.

1. Communicate a holistic, comprehensive definition of sustainability including environmental, economic, and social/societal goals to promote the importance of the triple-bottom-line approach to a sustainable and resilient agricultural sector
2. Include economic and social/society benefits in agri-environmental program promotions
3. Customize the EFP and promotional materials to address the specific concerns of different production sectors and demographics
4. Align EFP promotions with emerging and real-time industry issues where the EFP can help mitigate or manage risk (be part of the solution), or be used to seize new opportunity

5. Use diverse communication channels including social media to promote the EFP program and its benefits to diverse audiences, including youth
6. Use diverse delivery methods for the EFP program including in-person and virtual workshops, self-paced courses, downloadable templates, how-to videos, audio casts and a mobile app
7. Use diverse promotional methods including video success stories, testimonials, workshops and presentations, in-person and virtual farm tours and demonstrations, photos and on-farm visits with technical experts
8. Create an ongoing dialogue between government, producers and landowners to inform how to increase EFP adoption and implementation
9. Create specific communications to address perceived barriers and motivators to implementing EFPs (ex. free training, cost-share funding available, regulatory compliance, peace of mind)

### Future Research Recommendations

With very little research available on farmers and landowners who do not participate in agri-environmental programs, Ontario has an opportunity to pursue future research focused on a better understanding of barriers to participation, the results achieved by participants, and areas for improvement.

1. Direct research with everyone who has participated in an EFP workshop and/or completed an EFP to:
  - a. Understand the reasons for their participation and any changes to participation
  - b. Understand any challenges they encountered in implementing their EFP Action Plan and opportunities for program improvement
  - c. Understand and measure the benefits they have realized (including environmental, economic, and social) from creating/implementing their EFP
  - d. Understand the other agri-environmental programs they participate in, including their reasons for participating, any challenges encountered or areas for improvement, and benefits realized (including environmental, economic, and social)
  - e. Understand preferred communication tactics and learning preferences
2. Direct research with farmers and landowners who have not or have only occasionally participated in government or other agri-environmental programs to:
  - a. Understand the challenges and barriers to participating in government or other agri-environmental programs to inform improvement measures
  - b. Understand their motivations to participating in government or other agri-environmental programs to inform improvement measures including communication tactics
  - c. Understand preferred communication channels, formats and learning preferences to inform program design, marketing and promotions
3. Direct research to understand the uptake, performance measures and outcomes achieved by other government or agri-environmental programs to compare with and inform how to enhance EFP program uptake and benefits realized in Ontario
4. Direct research to understand how the EFP can integrate and be integrated into existing sustainability frameworks and assessment tools to increase uptake and effectiveness (ex. Farm Sustainability Assessment, Growing Your Farm Profits, Verified Sustainable Beef Program)
5. Direct research to better understand how environmental, economic and social sustainability measures and goals intersect to help communicate and promote the triple-bottom-line (3 pillars) of sustainability on farms