MEDIA RELEASE

Environmental beneficial management practices provide economic benefits for producers

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A better story must be told about the economic benefits for farmers practicing environmental stewardship, and the broader benefits to their neighbours and the landscape.

That key message came from an Environmental Beneficial Management Practices (BMP) Adoption Workshop held recently in Mississauga. The workshop was presented by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, in partnership with the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association, the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, Conservation Ontario and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Attended by over 100 representatives of farm organizations, conservation authorities, stewardship councils, academics, federal and provincial governments, and Friends of the Greenbelt and Oak Ridges Moraine Foundations, the workshop looked at recent surveys and studies relating to adoption of BMPs.

Attendees learned that, while initial implementation costs are often barriers to BMP adoption, several BMPs result in increased yields that can offset any increases in operating costs. These findings come from an economic evaluation of crop nutrient BMPs conducted by the George Morris Centre.

The goals of the George Morris Centre evaluation were to estimate farm profitability before and after selected BMPS were implemented, review available incentives, and assess the need for future incentives. The study was based on a literature review, an Ipsos Reid survey of about 1,000 field crop growers across Canada (200 in Ontario), and modelling and analysis. Results were estimated both with and without financial assistance. The study looked at results across Canada based on various crop rotations; in Ontario, a crop rotation of corn, soybeans, and winter wheat was used.

Overall, the study found that soil testing and nutrient management planning were the two most profitable BMPs investigated, with or without financial incentives, followed by minimum and no tillage practices. Buffer zones and variable rate fertilization were the two least advantageous BMPs in terms of financial returns.

The study also identified a need for better communications and outreach on environmental and economic benefits.

“Climate change and energy usage need to be at the forefront of BMPs in the future,” says Cher Brethour, a senior research associate with the George Morris Centre. “Information needs to be simplified and the economic net gain experienced by users needs to be stressed.”

A recent Ipsos Reid survey on farmer attitudes toward BMPs, which was the basis for the George Morris Centre study, found that Ontario producers have a high level of familiarity with BMPs and that 4 in 10 use more than one BMP. Kent Goldie, a senior market research manager with Ipsos Reid, said that Ontario is ahead of the national average for using soil testing BMPs, with an 86 percent participation rate. Eighty-five percent of Ontario producers say it is very important to manage the farm in a way that protects the environment.

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Government financial incentives are considered important by users of BMPs as well as non-users. While few (less than 10 percent) BMP users in Ontario have received government incentives, about two-thirds or more who use any of the BMPs evaluated feel that it is important for government to provide some financial incentives. Among those who don't use these BMPs, more than 80 percent say it is important for governments to provide financial incentives with the general feeling that governments should cover about 60 percent of the costs, on average.

"The key reasons for using BMPs are more efficient use of fertilizers, concerns about soil quality, and cost savings," noted Goldie.

Interest in BMPs is certainly growing across Canada. A recent Wildlife Habitat Canada (WHC) telephone survey of 1,794 farmers and ranchers on their views about ecological goods and services found that 8 in 10 producers are interested in learning more, 7 in 10 have a willingness to adopt new practices, and 2 in 10 remain "change averse."

"Participation is driven by environmental commitment but can be hindered by economic concerns," says Lynn McIntyre, director of stewardship for WHC. "Finances are the main reason for not participating, followed by a lack of time."

The WHC study found that "improving water quality and soil productivity" were top considerations for taking action, followed by "promoting rural values/rural way of life".

The study suggests that future BMP programming needs to ensure that farmers are aware of the programs and better understand the economic and environmental benefits through workshops and other forms of outreach.

Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association Program Manager Andy Graham suggests that successful BMP adoption is influenced by five factors: education, proven BMPs, cost share, regulations and peer pressure.

"It is a constant challenge for producers to maintain sustainability and remain profitable," Graham says.

In Ontario, some $23 million has already been paid out to farmers for cost share BMPs out of an allocated $39.8 million from the federal government. Almost 9,000 BMP projects have received allocation through various cost share programs funded by the Agricultural Policy Framework, a federal-provincial-territorial initiative, and various top programs offered by Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, conservation authorities, Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, and Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation.

For more information about the studies and programs in this article, please visit:

BMPs and farm profitability – http://www.georgemorris.org

Ipsos Reid BMP Survey – http://www.cropnutrients.ca/News/news06080601.html

WHC's National Survey of Farmers and Ranchers –
http://www.whc.org/EN/ourwork/ResultsofNationalSurvey.htm

Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association – http://www.ontariosoilcrop.org

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