

A Saskatchewan Farmer's Experience with EFP's

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The environment on our grain farm

We've just been through a really wet, cool year and before that three years of drought. Our farm has survived quite a few droughts and a few wet years since my great grandfather, Elias Moen, broke the land in 1907. We are thankful for direct seeding practices and for programs like crop insurance to help us manage through these years of uncertain weather. We are recovering and bracing for a new cropping year.

The vast majority of grain farmers in Saskatchewan are responsible and concerned citizens. We value and consider our neighbors and communities, and enjoy the rural environment where we live, work and play. We value the privacy and independence. At the same time we are very aware that we live in a global environment. We are all watching and learning about the effects of climate change. We know that what we do locally affects us all globally.

Most Saskatchewan producers have been making strides in enhancing the rural environment. We've seen a tremendous switch over to direct seeding practices, which greatly reduce the incidence of wind and water erosion. We've reduced the amount of acres of idle summerfallow land and have adopted extended crop rotations including pulses, oilseed and special crops. The switch to direct seeding and extended rotations has not happened because of government programs or regulations, but because it makes economic sense, and we can make more money if we are more efficient and diversified.

More marginal land is being taken out of annual crop production and is being seeded back to perennial forage. We've been planting field and farmstead shelterbelts and have been grassing down waterways. We have been making effective and responsible use of fertilizers and pesticides. Many producers have taken special measures to protect native prairie and endangered wildlife species on their farms. By and large we are good stewards of our environment. Sometimes though, the ability to manage our farms is made more difficult by events beyond our control, like weather extremes.

Why do we need environmental farm planning?

Saskatchewan grain farms are governed by provincial environmental legislation. Some of the legislation that affects grain farms includes:

Soil Drifting Control Act – municipalities can pass bylaws

Clean Air Act – burning wastes

Noxious Weeds Act, 1984 – control noxious weeds

Ground Water Conservation Act – protect groundwater

Environmental Management and Protection Act, 2002 – general pollution

Some producers may not be in compliance with these regulations, not because they are actively violating, but they may not be aware that the legislation exists. Prosecution is rare. I'm not sure that anyone has ever been charged under the Soil Drifting Control Act, but the legislation is there.

Ideally, Saskatchewan producers would get involved with Environmental Farm Planning not because of legislation, but because it makes good business sense. Grain farmers have become more responsive to our markets and what they demand. For example, organic farmers are aware that meeting a certain production standard will gain them access to a new market. I understand that if Canadian organic farmers meet the Bio Suisse standard they can gain access to European markets. In this case, meeting a production standard opens up a market opportunity, and this provides the incentive to produce in a certain way. I'm not saying that organic and environmentally sound agriculture are always synonymous, but here's an example where the market calls for certain production practices.

We must also ensure there is not a double standard between urban and rural people. City people can be very guilty of overusing pesticides on lawns and gardens and then over-watering, which can negatively affect water supplies. City people must be just as responsible as rural people and environmental regulations must be equitable. Maybe we need "Environmental Lawn Planning".

Continuing to implement practices that enhance the environment on our farms enables us to be a better neighbor, a responsible member of our community and to comply with the existing legislation. We can all use a better understanding of our soil and water resources, and to learn about environmental risks and to develop a plan to reduce these risks.

My experience with Environmental Farm Planning

Environmental Farm Planning is new to Saskatchewan. Other provinces like Alberta and Ontario have made progress in developing an environmental farm planning process. The process has been voluntary in Alberta and Ontario, and it will be voluntary in Saskatchewan as well. We've taken the opportunity to borrow and modify their materials and approaches. The agricultural industry in Saskatchewan is unique because in many cases we are dealing with large operations.

I've had a chance to go through the Saskatchewan workbook. It's a resource that can help farmers assess their soil and water resources, determine their environmental risks, rate their farming practices, and build an action plan. Workshops are now being offered to Saskatchewan producers to test the materials and methods. The workshops provide a safe venue to understand legislation, to develop a plan to reduce risk and an increased understanding of improvement options.

There may however be some resistance to the environmental farm planning. Incentives will be needed for some producers to participate. Many producers are strapped for resources, including money, labor and time. Farms are getting larger. Many producers have off-farm jobs and only have time to farm on evenings, weekends and holidays. Some producers may be unwilling to share information they are not comfortable with. Many farms have a lot of history. Some producers may not want to take the risk that they are in violation of regulations. Producers may

resist more rules and regulations. Some producers will need to purchase materials, buy new equipment, hire consultants, etc. Many producers will resist a change to their lifestyle and may feel they are losing their independence. \

Incentives can take many forms

More efficiency and reduced costs - direct seeding is a good example of a best management practice which makes good economic sense to implement.

Market incentive – a producer will make a change for market reasons. Could Canadian products meeting a certain environmental standard demand a market premium? Could we open up new markets or protect existing markets?

Ability to get lending - producers do pay attention to what our lenders demand. We need capital to operate our farms and acquire assets. Perhaps we would be considered for a lower interest rate if we have completed an environmental farm plan.

Direct financial incentives – producers could receive incentives to attend workshops and implement best management practices

Tax incentives – getting a tax break would be nice

Incentives for recycling – pesticide containers, batteries, oil, etc.

Rewards or recognition – some producers respond to these

Conclusions and recommendations

Environmental Farm Planning in Saskatchewan must be voluntary and driven by producers themselves. Producers should implement best management practices because they make good business sense.

The Environmental Farm Plan must be kept confidential and the producer's privacy protected.

Cross compliance will not be successful. Producers will not want to be forced to participate. They need to be given a choice.

Federal and provincial governments must work together with local government, farm policy groups, commodity groups and farmers to drive the Environmental Farm Planning process.

Some producers will look at Environmental Farm Planning as an opportunity, get to know resources better, understand the risks and hazards, manage and protect their resources. Others will be more resistant.

Incentives will be important to encourage participation and overcome resistance to the process.

There must not be a double standard between urban and rural people (ie. Pesticide and fertilizer storage and use).