

## **Farmers facing up to environmental responsibilities**

by Hugh Maynard

There are few economic sectors today that can avoid environmental considerations while carrying out business, and agriculture is no exception. As the process of developing environmental policies and programs for agriculture plods through the maze of concerns from government, industry, consumer and special interest groups, finally landing in the laps of farmers for action, some interesting initiatives have managed to emerge. The process also signals that farmers can expect a clear choice heading into a new century: adopt improved environmental practices voluntarily or face compliance through regulation.

### **Getting into gear**

Anticipating conflict between farmers and the newly elected NDP government in Ontario over a suggested "Environmental Bill of Rights", the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) has spearheaded a drive for the establishment of individual farm environmental plans.

The concept is simple: farmers conduct an environmental assessment of their operation, identify priority areas for change and then establish a plan of action for implementation. The development of this idea has become a model for cross-sector co-operation, with "Green Plan" funding from Agriculture Canada, personnel from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, co-ordination through the University of Guelph and input from farm groups.

The aim is to head off the harshest elements of environmental regulation by being able to present the agricultural milieu in a "pro-active mode," according to Gord Surgenor, Chairman of the Sustainable Agriculture Council at the University of Guelph.

He describes the environmental farm plan initiative as occupying the middle ground between the extremes of imposed regulations and no active response on the part of farmers to environmental questions.

"Command and control measures are expensive, they require inspectors, lawyers and generate mistrust," says Surgenor, noting that simple solutions tend to get overlooked in systems that impose centralized controls.

Surgenor is currently overseeing the compilation of a reference manual that farmers will be able to use to evaluate the environmental state of their farm. Every conceivable situation on the farm that could potentially have an environmental effect - from cropping practices to pesticide storage - will be listed in the manual, sorted into 23 "risk assessment categories." Each situation will then be ranked on a scale of one to five, from best to worst respectively.

Farmers will be able, for example, to compare the state of their manure handling facilities to those listed in the manual. Once assessed, the farmer can then judge by the score, firstly, whether improvements need to be made and, second, to what extent these changes need to be carried out.

Surgenor points out that the farm environmental assessment may identify situations that are potential problems but require no immediate action. For example, a well may be high-risk in terms of contamination due to its location; barring re-location, regular monitoring would be considered the most appropriate action.

Respecting confidentiality, the evaluation and assessment by the farmer will also be examined by a peer review committee to ensure that the process does not become meaningless, as well as to provide the opportunity for advice and encouragement in working towards any necessary improvement.

"If you're a polluter, this is not going to protect you," Surgenor warns those who might see self-regulation as a means to avoid the issue altogether. He also adds that the environmental farms plans will not completely replace regulations, only make their presence more manageable and less burdensome.

The reference manual is presently undergoing final revision to ensure that there is as broad a consensus as possible amongst the different sectors involved in agriculture (one man's manure pile is, after all, another man's poison!).

Pilot projects in seven counties, involving 500 farmers drawn from a wide mix of geographic, commodity and urban/rural characteristics, will start in 1993. Assuming positive reaction and substantive results, the program will be available to all farmers in 1994.

#### **Other side of the coin**

A modified version of the environmental farm plan will also get underway in Quebec in 1993. A federal-provincial agreement between agricultural ministries will funnel \$40 million over the next three

years into a package of programs that will promote technological innovations, demonstration projects and groupings of farmers carrying out environmental improvements on their farms.

This latter program has been dubbed "enviro-clubs," and these groups of 20 producers will receive 90% of the funding required to hire an environmental advisor who will help devise farm environmental plans and implement sustainable farming practices.

Compliance, however, may also become part of everyday life for Quebec farmers if the province's ministry of the environment (MENVIQ) has its way. At the end of January, a new strategy aimed at protecting waterways from agricultural pollution was announced. Rivers that drain into regions with the highest population density will be the priority target, areas which are also the most intensively farmed in the province.

### **Pollution**

MENVIQ has long claimed that field run-off containing soil particles, high nutrient levels (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium) and pesticides have been contaminating waterways, threatening wildlife and drinking water supplies.

The strategy will implement twenty different laws, regulations, policies and programs with the aim of correcting pollution problems in waterways caused by agricultural activity by the year 2000.

In areas of intensive crop and animal production, MENVIQ is aiming to have 80% of producers adopt an "integrated soil and water conservation plan" which will be used to monitor the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides as well as the application of animal manure. Farmers may be required to keep a log book of all such applications.

The ministry says that producers who do not conform to this requirement will be denied access to government funded programs aimed at improving the agricultural environment, such as the subsidy for construction of manure handling facilities.

Quebec farmers will also face the mandatory establishment of a three metre wide, uncultivated strip along the edge of waterways. Known as the "3m band", the intent is to keep heavy machinery from further deteriorating riverbanks and to act as a sponge for potential run-off pollutants such as herbicides and nitrates.

The 3m band is controversial with farmers. A study conducted by the Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA), Quebec's general farm organization, showed the concept to be ineffectual as a run-off filter. On a flat field where all water leaves evenly across the length, the concept is fine; most fields are not flat or even, and in reality 90% of surface water exits via two or three points, any vegetation present quickly becoming inundated.

Farmers also claim that the 3m band will become just another untended area where weeds will be able to proliferate, requiring extra expense to maintain the strip or further use of chemicals to control the weeds that become established in adjacent fields.

### **Surprised**

Louis Mžnard, a UPA official responsible for environmental concerns, says that the UPA is in agreement with the objectives of the MENVIQ strategy but has serious difficulties with the way it is being applied.

"Who will pay for these farm plans? Who will apply these norms? MENVIQ doesn't have the resources to implement them," Mžnard said.

He said his organization would prefer to see initiatives that favour education, advisory services and the transfer of technology rather than hard regulations.

Mžnard pointed to the present MENVIQ program for the upgrading of manure handling facilities as an area of commitment that needs to be fulfilled before the environment ministry takes on new projects.

Aimed at providing manure storage capacity for at least 200 days of the year in order to eliminate winter spreading, the program has allocated only \$78 million in the last four years of a promised ten year, \$385 million program. The new strategy will raise the storage capacity minimum to 365 days.

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