

New direction needed for Rural Routes

by Hugh Maynard

It was billed as a soil conservation and sustainability in agriculture extravaganza. It turned out to be a bit of a bust when less than a third of an expected attendance of 10,000 turned up for the two-day event.

The experience of Rural Routes '92, "Ontario's showcase of resource planning" organized by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food (OMAF), clearly demonstrates the need for a different approach. For despite some interesting content, the format did not attract the numbers, or even the interest amongst those who did attend, to warrant such a large, stand-alone event in the future.

Firstly, there were too many simultaneous workshop sessions and too little time for the presenters to tell their tale; speakers accustomed to having 45 minutes barely had 15, with five minutes for questions. Secondly, running workshops in darkened rooms in the middle of June ran against all instincts of most farmers during summertime.

The bus tours of conservation sites and demonstration farms suffered the same fate. Too many stops and not enough time to fully examine and question the operations on display. One bus tour spent half an hour driving through the tourist spots of Stratford yet literally drove past a farm billed as an "innovative farm program." There was not much innovation in looking at Angus cattle grazing from a school bus window, even at 10 kph.

Rural Routes would have received much greater value for money by subsidizing the most interesting exhibitors to make a tour of county fairs, the speakers to attend winter and annual meetings, and by giving the rest of the funds to local soil and water conservation groups to set up one or two day individual group tours. That way, they would at least be able to stop and chat if they want to.

Alive and well

That having been said, it was evident from some of the tours conducted by Rural Routes in the Woodstock-Tavistock area that soil and water conservation practices are alive and well in Ontario.

There was nothing startling or entirely new for those who have been experimenting with and using soil conservation practices. However, the dozen or so farms used as demonstration sites clearly showed that soil conservation methods - whether no-till, terraces, cover crops or grassed waterways - are practical, usable, affordable and with proper planning, are capable of being integrated into the crop management routine of any farm.

The spirit of progression in soil conservation practices was captured by John Alderman, an area farmer who keeps 115 sows and raises 2000 feeder hogs annually. He has been adapting his farm, composed of light soils on rolling hills, to soil conservation practices since he purchased it in 1978.

"The doubters said it would never work and the rest would learn from our mistakes," Alderman said to one of the tour groups as he explained the workings of his "zone-till" planter. A no-till system that works up a zone, or strip, with the coulters just in front of the planter shoot. With weights added to the front of the planter frame, the soil is worked up to a depth of four inches, preparing a suitable seed bed for quick germination, solving the common no-till problems of trash blockage and poor seed placement.

Alderman's approach to soil conservation was not haphazard, but the result of planning before experimenting with different strategies. He worked with the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority, which offers an evaluation, identification and implementation process for cropland conservation planning.

The service, utilizing a planning procedure and advisors like Brad Glasman, determines the extent of the soil erosion problem before adopting strategies to remedy the situation. Just as importantly, once action is taken, the service provides the means for evaluating results and adapting further measures accordingly.

Glasman, also a speaker at one of the workshop sessions, showed that conservation planning can breathe life back into even the most eroded soils. He gave as an example the research farm of Vetrepharm Inc., near Woodstock.

Rejuvenation

Suffering from "three owners in 15 years, management abuse and severely degraded soils" due to continuous cash cropping, the company decided that due to environmental concerns, something had to be done. Glasman applied the Universal Soil Loss Equation (USLE) to determine the extent of the problem in the "dog's breakfast" of different soils stretched across the 177 acres of farmland, some of which were on sharp slopes of 8% over a distance of 800 feet. The results of the analysis using the equation were then applied to a chart for comparing appropriate soil

conservation measures, starting with contours and working all the way up to combinations of contours, strip cropping and conservation tillage, depending on the severity of the problem.

Glasman devised a mixture of terraces, grass waterways and windbreaks to stabilize the site, and then went to work with short-term measures such as mulch-till to improve soil quality. Gradually, some areas were turned into pasture and crop stripping was introduced. The farm is now 100% no-till. "We made some progress which was actually quite dramatic compared with what was there before," said Glasman.

This was the positive side of Rural Routes, the demonstration that soil conservation can be done, and is really a question of commitment rather than any lack of available know-how. Peter Dorris, of the Ontario Cattlemen's Association, summed it up during his presentation on measures to protect river banks and conserve nutrients in manure. "Any system can work or fail, what matters are the people working with it."

The "Cropland Conservation Farm Planning - A guide to conservation techniques and systems selection" is available from the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority, RR 6, London, Ontario. N6A 4C1. Tel: 519-451-2800 or Fax: 519-451-1188.

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