

Farmers should come first in Green Plan

Despite its name, the Green Plan was not intended to be a recycling program; but that is what it has come to be, with dubious environmental results. The plan was supposed to be an opportunity for a wide spectrum of Canada's society to participate in making the country's environment better, including farmers. However, Green Plan funds that should be targetted for farmers seem to be going more as make-up money for the decline in institutional revenues resulting from the stagnant economy and general government cutbacks.

The idea of farm conservation clubs, for example, adopted in at least two provinces (Ontario and Quebec), are good examples for other provincial farm conservation strategies. Although they have been established with similar goals, they are being implemented by very different approaches.

In Quebec, the farm conservation program is being operated on a "club" basis, called Clubs Conseil and Clubs d'Encadrement. Groups of farmers (20 minimum) make proposals on what they would do to make their farms more sustainable and how they would measure that progress. The clubs are co-ordinated by an "eco-conseiller" (ecological consultant) whose expenses are paid 10% by the farmers and 90% by government, which ends up costing the individual farmer approximately \$250 per year. Albeit not a large amount of money as a contribution, it is hard currency out of the farmer-members' pocket, which is an important distinction from the Ontario approach where money-in-kind and levered government dollars make a significant portion of the non-government contribution. In addition, the best proposals per region that provide a global approach to achieving greater environmental sustainability through farming practices are chosen, all being given an equal share of the funding on a pro rata basis.

Contrast this with Ontario, where the approach has been to split funding into two levels of groups. Group A carry out projects on a provincial basis and participants may include farm organizations, environmental research groups, private enterprise, conservation authorities, universities and colleges. Group B are local clubs with at least two-thirds of members being farmers. Group A organizations qualify for funding up to \$50,000 per year and Group B clubs \$20,000 per year, with 50% of the funding having to be matched - including in-kind donations. This presents several problems, with the first being that real farm groups are marginalized by getting only 40% of the funding of the institutions. The second is that government funds should not be matched with more government funds; there is a tremendous temptation for cash starved provincial governments to obtain funds (via Agriculture Canada), destined to help farmers, to help maintain funding for provincial institutions.

However, the worst part of Ontario's program has been how it has been implemented. Legitimate farm groups who have applied to be province-wide clubs have been turned down and relegated to the B group. Much of the money has also gone out under the tired old umbrella of "soil and water conservation". As well, the level of funding that has gone out to certain rural "conservation" clubs needs to be questioned; for example, the full Group A funding of Ducks Unlimited must be seen as inappropriate in the context of there being higher environmental priorities in Ontario than creating species-specific habitat for the purposes of increasing the annual take of wild duck meat for the tables of Ontario sharp shooters.

The main difference in the approaches taken by Ontario and Quebec is that one province has recognized that farmers are the most important factor in bringing about a more environmentally sustainable agriculture. The other approach lends itself to mis-use and treats farmers as second class citizens. These are important lessons for other provinces setting up on-farm programs destined to work towards the original objectives of the Green Plan.

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