Cover crop convert heads up REAP

by Hugh Maynard & David Jones

John Van Dorp believes that ecological farmers go unrewarded by the government and until more incentives are offered, progress in the areas of soil conservation and reduced dependence on chemical inputs will be slow.

Van Dorp, who operates a combined 325 acre dairy, hog and cash crop farm with his father and brother in Woodstock, Ontario, was elected president of Resource Efficient Agricultural Production - Canada (REAP) at the organization's annual meeting last January.

He points to his own experience of having reduced input costs by $20,000 a year through the adoption of soil conserving measures, savings that eventually become a tax liability. Governments should be lobbied, he says, to provide tax credits for sustainable crop practices, making up the difference with taxes on non-renewable inputs.

The Van Dorp farm has won numerous awards for soil conservation and crop production, including county-wide corn yields that were evaluated not only for performance but also for input requirements.

He started by adopting soil conservation techniques that have allowed for the continued production of high yields while reducing inputs. Van Dorp has since moved on to using cover crops as well as alternative forms of fertilization such as seaweed and molasses in foliar applications. He believes that mixing seaweed and molasses with liquid manure has resulted in healthier stands of plants and hence more resistant to pests. He has also tried experiments with corn sugar, fish meal and calcium for both nutrients and weed control.

Trying out new ideas has put Van Dorp at the forefront of implementing sustainable practices. He has planted windbreaks of willows along the edges of some of the fields, and notes that it's an easy way for farmers to protect their land from wind erosion.

"In the winter, you just cut up the willow cuttings, hack them at 10-12 inches, and then stick them in the ground in spring. I like the idea of them growing 70 feet in 7 years," he says.

Van Dorp says that woody species like willows can be used for alternate energy sources as well as for protecting soil resources. He thinks that researchers and decision makers have to go overseas to places like Sweden, where these ideas are being more readily adopted, to see for themselves. "I think that's the best way to get something started."

He plans to continue experimenting with new techniques and alternate methods to improve the sustainability of the farm. "You've got to live and learn," he concludes.