

GREEN MATTERS

A newsletter from the Alberta Environmentally Sustainable Agriculture Council

A Catalyst for Stewardship

From AESA
Council's Chair

by John Kolk,
Poultry Industry Council

When neighbours ask me what the Alberta Environmentally Sustainable Agriculture (AESA) Council does, I struggle to get the important information out in a short conversation. I usually mention that it is a unique partnership between the farm sector, agricultural processing sector, government, and non-government organizations focused on environmental sustainability.

On the odd occasion when someone presses me on 'What does AESA actually do?', I talk about the funding of the rural extension staff, partnerships, and the tie-ins with various other programs run by conservation groups, municipalities, and other federal and provincial departments. Council also shares information, tries to look forward to address upcoming issues, and engages the production and processing sectors and the provincial Agriculture Minister on important sustainability issues.

This issue of Green Matters really helps to answer the question of what AESA actually 'does' as it affects the farm and ranch community. We have great AESA Program staff in the Conservation and Development Branch of Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development that looks to Council for direction and gives us feedback on important issues in the agriculture sector. But that feedback needs to turn into actions through programs that are easily accessed and activities that make sense at the farm and ranch level.

The demand by Council members that environmentally sustainable programs be streamlined and farm-friendly led to the Putting the Pieces Together Workshop last spring and a follow-up workshop this coming spring. Council recognized that the multitude of programs needed to be acknowledged and, from the farm and ranch point of view, organized and coordinated for easy access. By next spring, we plan to have a web-based database on these programs at the fingertips of the many extension people who interact directly with farmers and ranchers.

Council has also worked to bring some high quality information to the greenhouse gas

issue, the emerging field of environmental goods and services, and the development of the Environmental Farm Planning process as a tool for ranchers and farmers. These are not issues that Council has to 'do', so much as coordinate and encourage an industry voice in the policy and practical application.

Council members have also played a part in encouraging the environmental component of the Agricultural Policy Framework (APF) to coordinate with the many activities needed to encourage on-farm practice change. On-farm practice change requires a blend of attitude, knowledge, tools, and targeted



AAFRD

WHAT'S INSIDE

Different Programs,
Common Goals

Partnering for Change

From Plans to Actions

Council Profiles: Alberta
Association of Municipal
Districts and Counties,
Association of Alberta
Agricultural Fieldmen

One Window on R&D

Issue No.21, Fall 2004

Sharing Goals, Information & More

“If we can get all these programs under one umbrella..., it would address a lot of concerns.”

An array of government, industry and environmental agencies are involved in providing environmental stewardship programs for Alberta’s agricultural producers and processors. Although they all share the general goal of enhancing stewardship, each program has its own particular approach, objectives, eligibility criteria and activities. So how do you find the program that best meets your specific needs?

As a key step in answering this question, AESA Council hosted the Putting the Pieces Together Workshop in April 2004. The two-day workshop was developed by a team of three AESA Council members — Dennis Bergheim, Cindy Chiasson and Brenda Schoepp — with assistance from AESA Program staff and others.

Bergheim says the workshop’s purpose was “to discuss current programs and how we can more

effectively serve Alberta’s agriculture and food industry in achieving environmental stewardship.”

He adds, “With all the different stewardship programs available, it can be difficult and frustrating for producers and even for extension agents to know the proper access to the various programs. If we can get all these programs under one umbrella... where people could easily access this information, it would address a lot of concerns from people trying to find the right programs for what they need.”

Representatives from about 30 agencies involved in stewardship programming attended the workshop. On the workshop’s first day, agency representatives outlined their programs. On the second day, participants discussed options to provide access to clear, consistent, well-organized information on stewardship extension. Bergheim explains, “This information is needed by producers and

extension agents for making decisions, developing plans and adopting new practices and systems.”

Workshop participants identified several priority actions, including the following:

- Make the workshop an annual event to continue the collaborative process to improve stewardship programming.
- Develop a web-based, searchable database for use by extension agents and others to provide information on programs, available resources, publications and skill sets.

Bergheim says, “It’s very important for the agriculture and food industry to continue to encourage and support environmental programs to ensure that we’re doing our part in environmental stewardship, and to continue working with all partners to achieve this goal.”

Locally based, targeted programing

Like many stewardship programs, AESA’s Farm Based Program aims to encourage adoption of environmentally responsible practices by producers. However, it has several unique features, allowing it to fill an important role that strengthens local extension programs.

“The Farm Based Program emphasizes local solutions to local concerns, partnering, and measurable results,” says Karen Cannon, AESA Program Manager.

Under this program, local agencies like municipalities and producer groups apply for grants based on the three-year plans they prepare for their programs. Cannon explains, “To develop a three-year plan, each agency does a needs assessment to determine the extension needs of their producer clients. From that assessment, they determine the goals or

priorities they’d like to concentrate on, and then develop objectives, an action plan and ways to measure how much progress they are making toward their goals.”

The Farm Based Program’s grants focus on manpower funding so agencies can hire rural extension staff to conduct their stewardship programs. As well, the program also provides training for these extension agents on key issues.

Cannon says, “Rural extension staff work closely with individual producers, targeting those issues that are priorities for the local producers.” She adds, “This approach works really well because the rural extension staff can take the time to build relationships, and gain the trust and confidence of farmers.”

She believes AESA’s manpower focus is one reason why, in a recent survey of Alberta producers, 39% of respondents said they had

made changes to their practices within the past three years as a direct result of attending stewardship extension events, and 34% intend to make a change within the next three years.

One of the criteria for Farm Based funding is that the agencies must partner with other stakeholders to develop their plans and deliver their programs. This requirement encourages agencies to work toward mutual goals, to share ideas, information and resources, and to avoid duplication of effort.

AESA’s emphasis on collaboration doesn’t stop with the grants provided at the local level. AESA Council and provincial AESA Program staff work closely with other federal, provincial, industry and environmental agencies to cooperate on programs and projects, to develop complementary activities, and to share information.

Partnering for Change

“In a sense, the Environmental Farm Plan [EFP] program is on the leading edge of change -- working with farmers in terms of awareness and education. And we’re able to do what we do because there are a lot of other partners that are equally willing and excited to work with farmers to implement practice change,” says Mike Slomp, Executive Director of the Alberta Environmental Farm Plan Company, a private, non-profit company.

Slomp is referring to the EFP program’s position in the overall change process. Whether you’re switching to a different toothpaste or modifying your farming system, the decision to change usually involves several stages. Typically, you go from awareness that there are other options that may better suit your needs, to education about

“It’s rewarding to see so many groups working together.”

those options, to testing some of the preferred options, and then to implementing to the option that’s best for you.

The EFP process helps producers to identify their environmental risks and opportunities, and to develop their own plan to address those opportunities and risks. “Farmers have tools to deal with market risks and tools to deal with production risks. An environmental farm plan is a tool to deal with environmental risks,” explains Slomp. Other benefits from developing an environmental farm plan include: improving farm health and safety; maintaining water, air, soil and wildlife habitat quality; sustaining the land for the next generation; and reducing agricultural inputs.

The free, voluntary, confidential EFP process includes two workshops, a take-home workbook, and a review. Slomp notes, “Through this process, farmers learn about how their farming practices may impact the environment. They learn about specific practices that maintain or promote good soil, water, air and habitat quality. And they learn about what they’re already doing well and where they could make improvements.”

The company recently completed its first full year of delivering the EFP program to Alberta producers at workshops across the province. To date, 1500 farmers and ranchers have attended at least one workshop. “It’s really their enthusiasm for the program that has made the first year successful,” says Slomp.

Another key to the program’s success is the company’s network of partners, including the federal and provincial agriculture departments, commodity groups, non-government conservation agencies, agricultural service boards and agricultural fieldmen, and local businesses.

One example is the partnership with AESA’s Farm Based Program (see “Locally Based, Targeted Programming”). AESA’s provincial staff and the AESA-funded rural extension staff assist the EFP program by promoting the environmental farm plan concept to farmers, by providing technical assistance at EFP workshops, or by providing expertise to develop the EFP workbook. And they benefit from the results of the EFP process because they can target their extension efforts to address key issues identified by producers through the EFP process.

Slomp says, “AESA’s mandate is broader than just what EFPs are about. EFPs are a tool — we provide a tool that the AESA staff can use to help achieve their mandate.”

The Alberta Environmental Farm Plan Company is currently embarking on a new partnership with the federal and Alberta governments in the Canada-Alberta Farm Stewardship Program. That program will provide technical and financial assistance to help farmers implement beneficial management practices (see “From Plans to Actions”). To be eligible for assistance, a producer must have an environmental farm plan that has been reviewed and deemed acceptable.

Slomp says, “Our company provides the process for farmers to develop an environmental farm plan and to have it reviewed by a trained committee of experienced local farmers and ranchers. We’ll also tell EFP participants about the Farm Stewardship Program, and we’ll give application forms to those with a reviewed plan.”



Roth and Ramberg Photography Inc.

Gate sign for participants in the Environmental Farm Plan program.

The EFP program provides a sound basis for implementing specific beneficial management practices. Slomp explains, “In the EFP program, farmers do a complete inventory of how they are currently practising agriculture. The risks identified through that inventory usually indicate which particular management changes are most important for their operation.”

Other partnerships are making diverse contributions to the program, which range from lunch at a local EFP workshop to major funding support. Slomp says, “It’s rewarding to see so many groups working together to help bring about practice change.”

For more information about the Environmental Farm Plan program, call 1-866-844-2337 or visit www.albertaefp.com.

Hot off the press!

If you want information on practical, environmentally sustainable crop production, look no further! *The Environmental Manual for Crop Producers in Alberta* is now available.

This attractive, informative manual is free of charge. It’s full of useful tips, and helpful diagrams, photographs and tables.

It’s the latest manual in the *Beneficial Management Practices* series, developed through partnerships among government agencies, commodity groups and stewardship agencies, including AESA. The other manuals focus on hog, feedlot, cow-calf, dairy and poultry production. For copies of these manuals, call 1-800-292-5697 or visit www1.agri.gov.ab.ca.

From Plans to Actions

The newest program on Alberta's agro-environmental scene is the five-year Canada-Alberta Farm Stewardship Program. This federal-provincial-industry partnership provides technical and financial assistance to help Alberta producers implement environmentally sound practices. It has been designed from the start to complement and build on other programs.

The program is funded under the Agricultural Policy Framework, an agreement between the federal, provincial and territorial governments to work towards common goals for Canada's agricultural industry in five key areas, one of which is the environment.

The three partner agencies in the Farm Stewardship Program are: Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada; Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development; and The Alberta Environmental Farm Plan Company (see "Partnering for Change"). Over the five years, the federal government is contributing \$51.15 million for developing and implementing environmental farm plans in Alberta, and the Alberta government is providing \$32.55 million of in-kind contributions.

"The Environmental Farm Plan program will be the entry point to the Farm Stewardship Program," explains Carol Bettac of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada/Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA). "Producers who have completed an environmental farm plan that's been reviewed and deemed appropriate by a committee of experienced producers will receive an application for the Stewardship Program from The Alberta Environmental Farm Plan Company." Both programs are entirely voluntary, and a producer can choose to withdraw from the process before completing a plan or having it reviewed.

The Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) process provides a good starting place for making changes. "The [EFP] worksheets provide a comprehensive, objective way to assess a farm operation... And the workshops give producers the opportunity to share perspectives with each other and spark new ideas," says John Tackaberry of Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development.

The Farm Stewardship Program's goal is to enhance water, soil and air quality, and biodiversity. Targets have been set in each of these

"This is a very ambitious program, but it's the right thing to do."

areas. Physical changes, such as organic matter content in soil and nitrate content in water, will be assessed to measure progress toward the targets over the five years.

"Five years is a very short time to first bring about changes in practices and then begin to see the effects of those changes on the environment," says Tackaberry. "This is a very ambitious program, but it's the right thing to do. If we don't have improvements on the landscape, then we really haven't achieved the objectives."

The Farm Stewardship Program will contribute from 30 to 50% of the cost per project, to a maximum of \$30,000 per farm over the five years. The cost-sharing ratio depends on the ratio of public benefit to producer benefit from the specific practice. The producer's contribution can be in various forms such as cash, materials, labour, and/or equipment use.

A total of 26 practices are eligible for program funding. A team of federal and provincial technical staff, with input from Alberta producers, selected those 26 practices as the ones that would give the greatest benefits for the tax dollars invested. "For each practice, there is a PFRA specialist who will be the point of contact for farmers, so farmers won't be going all over the place trying to get information," notes Bettac.

Tackaberry says the program's financial incentives should help speed up implementation of farm plans, especially given the financial stresses for producers in the last three years due to drought, the BSE crisis and low commodity prices.

Bettac adds that technical assistance is also vital, whether it's through the Farm Stewardship Program or other complementary programs, like the local programs funded through AESA's Farm Based Program (see "Locally Based, Targeted Programming").

She says, "Adopting a different production system often requires time and effort to learn about that system. For example, changing to a sustainable grazing system is about having someone help the producer learn about what specific practices mean in terms of how the community of plants in his own pasture respond, and how the other elements of his pasture's ecology respond. Ultimately it's gaining specific understanding that allows a producer to change practices."

The program's three partner agencies will be working with other agricultural and environmental agencies toward shared environmental goals. Bettac says, "Our aim is to bring all the different efforts together in an 'environmental program value chain' so they are all linked and driving toward the goal of implementing environmentally sound practices." Tackaberry adds that the most important players are Alberta's farmers and ranchers: "They are the ones controlling the resources on their own farms, and collectively how they do that will determine how the environment will be influenced."



Roger Bryan

Fencing to manage grazing and improve riparian areas is one of practices eligible for funding.

COUNCIL PROFILES

Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties

With a membership that includes all of Alberta's incorporated rural municipalities, the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties (AAMD&C) is "involved in pretty well every area that affects rural Alberta," says Jack Hayden, who has been the association's president since 1998.

"We want to see healthy, sustainable communities in rural Alberta," notes Hayden. The association pursues that goal through "our work with government and through our resolution process where suggestions come forward from our membership on how to move forward on issues."

Hayden explains, "We serve as the lobbying voice and the communication connection between rural municipalities in Alberta and the provincial and federal governments."

Members of the AAMD&C meet with individual ministers to discuss priorities, and they also sit on a wide variety of committees, including many that relate to agriculture and the environment. For example, the association has representatives on the Advisory Committee to the Alberta Minister of the Environment, the Clean Air Strategic Alliance, and committees dealing with topics like water quality, wastewater systems, and private sewage.

One of the main environmental issues for many rural municipalities is proper land use. Hayden says, "There's an awful lot of farmland being

**"We want a clean, healthy
and sustainable environment
in rural Alberta."**

taken up already with our oil industry and the effects of forestry, but the expansion of country residential development has been a huge issue lately."

Another important environmental focus for rural municipalities is to help farmers and ranchers adopt environmentally friendly practices. Their agricultural service boards

and agricultural fieldmen have programs and activities, such workshops and demonstrations, on sustainable agriculture practices (see the following profile for more information).

The AAMD&C tries to set an example for environmental sustainability in its own operations — like the association's new building. Hayden says, "We now are in the most environmentally friendly, energy-efficient municipal building in the entire nation... [For example,] we heat with geothermal. We make use of insulation that goes well beyond any provincial or national standards. We used recycled material in the construction of our building... We have recycled tires in the stucco that add an extra R-value but also allow expansion and contraction of the surface with the differing temperatures so that it will last longer."

Hayden says the AAMD&C and AESA Council share a fundamental objective: "We want a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in rural Alberta." Bob Barss represents the AAMD&C on AESA Council.

For more information about the association, visit its website at <http://www.aamdc.com/>.

Association of Alberta Agricultural Fieldmen

Agricultural Fieldmen play a vital role in helping Alberta farmers and ranchers to better protect the environment. Taking care of the environment is a key part of making sure that agriculture is "here for the long run," explains Kevin Glebe. Glebe is President of the Association of Alberta Agricultural Fieldmen (AAAF).

Agricultural Fieldmen develop and implement programs to achieve the priorities and policies set by their municipality's Agricultural Service Board (ASB). The specific programs and activities vary from municipality to municipality, depending on local issues and needs.

Fieldmen have both regulatory and extension functions. They are appointed as inspectors or regulatory officers to enforce four Alberta acts: Agricultural Service Board Act; Weed Control Act; Soil Conservation Act; and Agricultural Pests Act. Their extension activities cover various topics including environmental stewardship.

"We have legislation to deal with soil erosion and weed concerns," says Glebe. "But the preferred technique is to educate everybody and promote the right actions, and use the legislation only as a last resort."

The AAAF serves its members in several important ways. Glebe explains, "It promotes educational and training standards for our members. For example, we provide in-service

**"...we're working at the local
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looking for..."**

training every fall for all our members to make sure they are up to date. The Association also gives us an opportunity to work with other organizations for the betterment of agriculture. As well, we have the opportunity as an Association to give input into new legislation that relates to agriculture."

Glebe notes that the AESA Program helps Agricultural Fieldmen get information about environmentally sound practices to producers through activities like workshops, seminars, field days and demonstrations. These local programs are targeted to local priorities.

Glebe believes the AAAF plays a valuable function on AESA Council. "Because we're working at the local level and have a sense of what producers are looking for, we can then provide information to the Council on what the issues are and assist with promoting their objectives to producers." The AAAF is represented on AESA Council by Dennis Bergheim.

For more information on the AAAF, visit the website at www.aaaf.ab.ca.



One-Window Approach for R&D

With clear priorities, a shared application process, and joint funding, the 14-member Agriculture Funding Consortium has an effective, streamlined process that benefits funding agencies, research and development performers, and Alberta's agricultural industry.

The Alberta Agricultural Research Institute (AARI), a longstanding funder of agricultural research, spearheaded the formation of the consortium in 2000. That year, three new funding agencies were created: the Alberta Crop Industry Development, the Alberta Livestock Industry Development Fund, and the Diversified Livestock Fund of Alberta. AARI's Freda Molenkamp says, "We sat down together and determined that 'We now have four organizations that will be doing work in a similar area, so how can we best work together?'"

This shared approach soon caught on with other agencies. AVAC Ltd. and the Agriculture and Food Council joined that same year, followed by Climate Change Central about a year later. The Alberta Barley Commission, Alberta Pulse Growers Commission, Alberta Canola Producers Commission and Alberta Chicken Producers signed on this past summer. And Alberta Milk, Alberta Pork and Alberta Egg Producers joined in October.

The consortium has identified nine funding priority areas (see box), including topics related to environmental stewardship. Within those overall priorities, each agency has its own specific priorities. Molenkamp notes, "We take a value chain approach, looking at everything

from the basic science right through to a commercialized product... and then going back to what the market requires so we can get a commercial product on the shelf."

All the agencies use the same application form, deadline dates and review process which saves time, effort and costs for the funding agencies and the researchers. When a researcher

"If we are really serious about getting strategic work done in this province, we need to be working together."

submits an application, it goes to all 14 agencies. Molenkamp notes, "The researchers like that they can access multiple funders and have a greater likelihood of their project being funded."

The proposals receive a thorough scientific review, and then the 14 agencies meet for a roundtable discussion. Each agency comes with its own ranking of the proposals based on its own priorities. The agencies share their perspectives and negotiate on joint funding for projects of mutual interest.

Joint funding allows more projects to be funded, especially high-cost projects that would be difficult for one agency to fund alone. As well, agencies with smaller budgets can stretch their funding dollars further. Together, the agencies can make quite an impact — in 2003, the



Agriculture Funding Consortium

Funding Consortium members

consortium awarded approximately \$15 million to agricultural research and development projects in Alberta.

To make the process even more effective, the agencies plan to have an open call for proposals each fall, based on the nine priorities, and then a more targeted call each spring, focusing on a few specific key issues.

The consortium has come a long way since 2000. Molenkamp says, "Looking back, it was probably one of the best things that we could have done. If we are really serious about getting strategic work done in this province, we need to be working together."

For more information, visit the Agriculture Funding Consortium's website at <http://www.fundingconsortium.ca>.

R&D funding priorities

The consortium's current priorities are:

- functional foods and nutraceuticals
- crop and livestock genomics
- bio-energy
- integrated crop and pest management
- greenhouse gas reductions and offsets
- animal disease diagnostics, treatment and prevention
- bio-fibres and bio-polymers
- value-added products
- crop/livestock/human interface issues

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Green Matters is the newsletter of the Alberta Environmentally Sustainable Agriculture (AES) Council. AESA Council consists of representatives from Alberta's agriculture and food processing industry, environmental organizations and government.

AESA Council's vision is that Alberta has a thriving agriculture and food industry that is operating in an environmentally responsible manner. Its mission is to lead the agriculture and food industry in addressing environmental challenges. And its goal is to develop and deliver collaborative environmental stewardship initiatives that result in sustainable growth of Alberta's farm, ranch and agri-food processing industry.

The purpose of *Green Matters* is to provide a forum for discussion of environmental issues in Alberta's agriculture and food processing industry.

To subscribe to *Green Matters*, call 780-422-4385. *Green Matters* is also available online at <http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca>.

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Alberta Environmentally Sustainable Agriculture Program