

Environmental farm plans paying off for producers

More and more farmers across Manitoba are taking steps to assess the environmental health of their operations. They're completing environmental farm plans (EFPs)—a voluntary, confidential process that helps identify and manage their agri-environmental assets.

Gary Hamm, who owns a cow and calf operation south of Morden, Manitoba, began the EFP process three years ago "to see where I could save some money on my operation and help the environment. It wasn't that much work—in fact, I took it home and went through the workbook at my own pace."

The results surprised even him. "I discovered that relocating my livestock and improving their wintering site could cut back on the cost of fuel, feed and cleaning, and benefit the health of my cattle as well," he says.

Based on his assessment, Hamm decided to put his plan into action.

Through *Growing Forward*, Hamm applied for funds to cover nearly 30 per cent of the cost of livestock relocation and upgrading his wintering site. He relocated his livestock corral to a better site, upgraded the corralling from wood to more durable, portable steel panels, and built a new calving barn.

Through *Growing Forward 2*, he also received funding that helped him pipe water to pastures rather than relying on ponds and creeks. He added new 12-by-28-foot calf hutches with five-foot windbreaks attached to the top.

"The windbreaks have stood up to some pretty bad winter winds without once blowing over," he says. He also replaced

Gary Hamm upgraded his corralling from wood to portable steel panels and built a new calving barn after completing an EFP.



electric fencing with new four-strand barbed wire fencing.

Big plan, bigger payoff

The improvements Hamm made to his operation after completing his environmental farm plan have paid off for him in big ways.

"I can leave cattle out later in fall, and turn them out earlier in spring because of the new shelters," he explains. "I'm saving on fuel because the animals are feeding out in the fields longer. They're healthier, and the pens require less cleaning than they did before. I'd say the improvements reduced our cleaning bill alone by 30 per cent."

Hamm says the EFP has also shown him ways to reduce his use of fertilizers on the property.

"Without the help of the funds, I wouldn't have been able to do all of this," he says. "But even if I hadn't been accepted for the funding, the environmental farm plan was still a good thing to do because it opened my eyes to opportunities I wouldn't have seen otherwise."

Thinking about the future

Jewel Mazur, an agri-environmental farm production advisor for Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, says that EFPs are a great way for

farmers to evaluate what is working, and what needs to be improved from an environmental perspective.

"EFPs help you improve the health and value of your farm, build a legacy for the next generation of farmers, and personally contribute to secure food and a sustainable future," she says.

Since the inception of the program, more than 6,000 producers have completed an EFP in Manitoba, assessing more than 9.3 million acres of land.

Mazur says environmental farm plans can also improve a farm's production efficiency, and help make Manitoba-grown commodities more marketable to environmentally conscious consumers around the world.

"The plan is meant to be flexible," says Mazur. "You can review and update it regularly to track your progress and ensure the ongoing environmental sustainability of your farm operation. And best of all," she adds, "it is completely confidential. The workbook never has to leave the farmer's hands."

Help getting started

Once the planning process is complete, producers are eligible to apply for a range of funding opportunities to improve their operations through *Growing Forward 2* initiatives.

Two of the most known *Growing Forward 2* programs that require a Statement of Completion—received after an EFP is completed—are Growing Assurance—Environment and Growing Assurance—Ecological Goods and Services. These programs allow farmers and organizations to apply for funding for projects such as relocating livestock confinement facilities that are too close to water, installing grassed waterways and more.

"MAFRD staff are here to help with the self-assessment process and provide advice for funding," Mazur says. ■

How environmental farm plans work:

You begin by attending a half-day workshop conducted by trained MAFRD facilitators and resource specialists. They introduce you to the workbook you'll use to assess the soil and site characteristics of your farm, and teach you the ins and outs of agricultural capability and soil limitations. Then you answer a number of questions to assess your farm's environmental assets and risks.

You complete your workbook at the end of the workshop with the help of facilitators, or at home on your own time. The workbook includes plenty of information that encourages farmers to learn about environmental regulations and best practices. Each section relates to a different type of farmstead or field and clearly highlights the regulatory requirements you need to fulfill to create a more sustainable operation.

Once you finish working through the assessment, you complete a customized farm action plan. An independent third party, Keystone Agriculture Partners (KAP), conducts a confidential review of your workbook and action plan. After KAP has reviewed your workbook, they issue a Statement of Completion certificate indicating you've completed the EFP process. The EFP needs to be reviewed every five years to remain valid.

Visit manitoba.ca/agriculture and check our calendar to get the dates of upcoming scheduled workshops.



The face of agriculture is changing. Are you ready?

A successful farm needs to have a plan in place to deal with the changing face of agriculture. *Growing Forward 2* is here to support your farm with funding you can use to:

- Adopt food safety systems
- Adopt environmental practices
- Stay competitive with new knowledge and skills
- Explore innovative ideas through onfarm research
- Bring your product to market
- Manage risk

We can help you develop your plan to success. | Email us at MAFRDGF2@gov.mb.ca or visit our website at manitoba.ca/agriculture and click on *Growing Forward 2*.

