

Symposium takes practical approach to water issues

There were ideas and research projects aimed at every sector of agriculture

BY LOIS HARRIS
Farm & Food Care Ontario

Practical water conservation and nutrient management research that farmers can use was presented at a recent agricultural symposium in Guelph.

Among the results were innovative, cost-effective technology and practices that covered a wide variety of sectors – from dairy to cash crops to orchards, vineyards and greenhouses.

Farm & Food Care Ontario hosted the symposium, which was attended by about 80 farmers, commodity group representatives, government workers, academics and business people.

The organization delivered the two research programs over two years on behalf of the Ontario and federal governments, which provided more than \$2 million in project funding. A total of 46 projects were completed.

“This is a good example of how government industry and academia can mutually collaborate to find innovative solutions to complex water management problems,” said Nigel Wood, who manages programs and partnerships in the environmental management branch of the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

A team from Livestock Research Innovation Corporation (LRIC) talked about the six water conservation videos they produced last year. There is one introductory video and five others that profile different types of dairy farms. Each is an on-farm interview with the owner explaining how he or she is saving water and money. The series goes through tie-stall, rotary, parallel and robotic systems.

In the introductory video, a whiteboard is used to explain that dairy farmers should care about water conservation because, in Ontario, they use 50 billion litres of the stuff to produce 2.5 billion litres of milk every year.

With that kind of consumption, and the pressure coming from increasing populations and rising temperatures from climate change, it says that putting in place low-cost, high-return conservation measures will pay off for now and for generations to come.

In one, Robin Flewwelling of Earlton tells how he rigged a

15-gallon soap barrel to the ceiling of his tie-stall operation. He stores water from the plate cooler in it and reuses it for the first rinse in the wash system. He figures he saves 30 gallons of water a day, and 11,000 gallons over the year. It was easy, inexpensive, and as he says, “the more we save now the less we will have to worry about it in the future.”

The videos were loaded into a touch-screen computer and made available for the first time at the Dairy Farmers of Ontario annual general meeting in January. The DFO is showing the videos it to members at regional meetings. They are also available through links on the LRIC website and the Farm & Food Care website.

Bruce Kelly, Farm and Food Care’s environmental program manager, co-ordinated the research programs, and characterized them as being a practical link to Best Management Practices (BMPs), helping farmers understand the steps they can take to achieve their goals. He also said that all the project proposals had to have the backing of a commodity board.

“We didn’t take any proposals from individual companies or ones that would solve individual problems, unless the research was applicable to an entire sector,” Kelly said.

The idea, he said, was to get practical information out in a usable format for as many farmers and growers as possible. That’s why he developed YouTube videos for most of the projects, providing on-camera interviews with the researchers and an overview of their work. Project summaries are also available on the Farm & Food Care website and in hard copy at their office in Guelph.

IN ANOTHER presentation, Dr. Jeanine West of Phytoserv showed how she and a team of

researchers collected water quality data at several container nurseries in both 2013 and 2014.

Water samples were collected and tested for nutrients at the source, in on-farm drains and at outlets or recycling ponds and measured against proposed storm water guidelines developed by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. Almost all the data showed that container nursery wastewater was well within the ministry targets for nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. The data will be used to help develop a water management strategy for nurseries.

Hajnal Kovacs of the Grand River Conservation Authority described the success of her team’s efforts in promoting water conservation to farmers and developing a drought contingency plan for the Whiteman’s Creek sub watershed. Whiteman’s Creek runs into the Grand River between Paris and Brantford, an area known for its rich agricultural land, and its cold-water trout fishery.

The goal of the project was to examine how to address the reoccurring issue of low water in the creek, and to provide cost-effective tools for farmers to sustainably irrigate their crops. Over the course of two summers, 16 fields were assessed and nine ponds were renovated at a cost of about \$6,000 per project. The drought plan was completed, and the GRCA set up a soil moisture probe borrowing program for local farmers.

The results support several water conservation initiatives, including the GRCA’s Rural Water Quality Program and the Grand River Fisheries Management Plan, as well as the provincial Drinking Water Source Protection Program.

When asked about the key

success factor of the project, Hajnal said it was the relationships that were built with the local farmers. She and a colleague would travel to the farms to talk face-to-face about BMPs,

pond renovating and other tools.

“The key was having someone able to drive out to meet people and act as a liaison,” Kovacs said.

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