

Ripple Effect #37

Farmers Growing a Better Environment

Good farmers are by definition stewards of the land. It makes sense to take care of what you rely on for a living.

However, economic pressures can make it difficult to do the right thing. Fencing off a riparian shoreline or native grassland represents an immediate cost in time and money to the farmer. It adds value to a farm operation and provides ecological benefits over the long term, but it can be hard to think of such rewards as cash in the bank.

In the United States, many programs are offered through the Natural Resources Conservation Service to give farmers more choices in how they manage their land and now a pilot project is underway in Canada.

The ALUS (Alternate Land Use Service) Ecological Goods and Services Research Project could change the way Manitoba farmers manage their land. It's a three-year pilot project in Manitoba's Rural Municipality of Blanshard, testing the concept of paying farmers for land management practices that provide environmental benefits, sometimes referred to as "ecological services," to Canadians. Greenhouse gas reduction, wildlife habitat enhancement and erosion protection are all examples of ecological goods and services.

Management practices that may be part of the program include: maintaining wetlands and natural lands, improving riparian areas, and establishing native plant forages on fragile cultivated lands. These and other conservation practices provide benefits to the parcel of land on which they are established, benefit the surrounding landscape (e.g., enhancing wildlife habitat), benefit waterways including drainage ditches, streams and rivers (e.g., reducing sediment and other pollutants in the water), and ultimately benefit the downstream receiving water body (i.e., Lake Winnipeg).

ALUS is a voluntary, incentive-based conservation program concept. Canada is the only major western country that does not have such a program. The ALUS concept has received widespread support from farmers, farm organizations, conservation groups, government officials, and other decision makers.

Payments to the landowner vary depending on the type of management practice established. Landowners can, at the same time, also apply to existing programs that provide funding for capital costs and other improvements, such as the Environmental Farm Plan.

Farmers in Minnesota and North Dakota who are interested in similar programs should contact their local Conservation District to check their eligibility in enrolling in available farm programs.

Information for this article was found on the Keystone Agricultural Producers and Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives websites
<http://www.kap.mb.ca/alus.htm> and <http://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/about.html>

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.

