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1 Stone Road West, 1st Floor, Guelph, Ontario N1G 4Y2
Toll: 1-800-265-9751 Tel: 1-519-826-4214 www.ontariosoilcrop.org

Adding value through the Species At Risk Farm Incentive Program

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 23, 2016

By Mary Wales for the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

Doug Johnson, a retired dairy farmer from just outside of Keswick in York County, is quite content with the recent changes he's made on his farm through the Species at Risk Farm Incentive Program. Johnson runs a cash crop operation (wheat, soy and hay) and is currently working his way towards an angus herd.

The Species at Risk Farm Incentive Program is a cost-share program that is designed to help farmers implement on-farm projects aimed at enhancing, protecting, or creating habitat for species at risk, such as the Snapping turtle or Monarch butterfly. The program promotes a number of on-farm best management practices to support species at risk that can be applied to croplands, grasslands, wetlands and woodlands.

Through the Species at Risk Farm Incentive Program, Johnson accessed cost-share funding for two different best management practices. For the first project, Johnson planted a tree shelterbelt next to his cow pasture, planting around 100 sugar maple trees that act as a windbreak between his fields and the pasture. "I know I likely won't be here to see them full grown," he says, "but I know they will add value to the farm and provide habitat for wildlife one day."

If they are designed properly, tree shelterbelts or windbreaks provide a number of benefits, including preventing soil erosion, sheltering crops and improving the overall biodiversity of a farm. In summer months, shelterbelts can protect crops from losing moisture by reducing the impact of hot and dry winds. Shelterbelts and windbreaks also provide shade for livestock, and can supply food and shelter resources to some species at risk.

Johnson's second project involved setting up fencing to exclude his livestock from environmentally sensitive areas — two ponds and a creek that run through his farm. At the bottom of a ravine on his property, the two ponds provide habitat for a number of species including birds, frogs, turtles and plenty of plants. The Ontario government has identified a number of species as at risk in York County such as the Blanding's Turtle, the Henslow's Sparrow and the Barn Swallow. Johnson points out how he's looking forward to warmer weather and the return of the many different species to his ponds.

The newly-installed fencing will prevent livestock from entering the ponds and creek, reducing impacts to water quality and habitat health. It will also prevent the livestock from drinking pond water, which could cause the animals to become sick. Healthy wetlands and ponds serve many purposes, including filtering water tables and recharging groundwater supplies with clean water, providing habitat for numerous plant and animal species and reducing crop damage from waterfowl by supplying food and habit so the geese will leave crops alone.

The fencing will undoubtedly help Johnson protect the ponds from livestock damage and contamination. A small stream that connects to Lake Simcoe also runs through his property and is now severed off from the pasture by the new fencing as well. Johnson points out how the projects have improved both the land for his cattle and the species that use the wetlands on his farm.

“It was a lot of work,” says Johnson, looking towards two Canadian geese floating in the larger of the two ponds while plenty of Red-winged Blackbirds zigzag back and forth. “But it was worth it.”

Both the provincial and federal government provide information on species at risk online, as well as details about the various species’ habitats and what they look like.

The Species at Risk Farm Incentive Program is funded by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry through the Species at Risk Stewardship Fund and the Government of Canada through the Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk.

In order to qualify for cost-share for projects through the Species at Risk Farm Incentive Program, Ontario farm businesses must have completed a third or fourth edition Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) workshop and have an Action Plan verified by OSCIA within the last five years (check the OSCIA website for upcoming EFP workshops in your area). Projects must address a proposed action from the farm’s verified complete EFP Action Plan through one of the roughly 20 eligible best management practices outlined in the 2016 SARFIP Brochure, which is available on the OSCIA website, along with application forms and information about other programs and resources for farmers and agricultural landowners in Ontario.

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Media contact:

Christine Schmalz
Environmental Programs Manager
519-826-6062
Christine.schmalz@ontariosoilcrop.org