



## HOW TO PREPARE FOR MORE ENVIRONMENTAL SCRUTINY

Water quality and soil health expected to be main targets

Canada's beef producers can be proud of their environmental track record, particularly recent efforts to build sustainability into the beef brand. But industry feedback also suggests that back on the farm, producers want to make sure programs don't over-promise, and that what is promised to meet rising expectations can be implemented.

The anchor for the environmental side of the new Verified Beef Production Plus (VBP+) program is the Environmental Farm Plan (EFP).

Ontario's Environmental Farm Plan program celebrated its 25th anniversary recently. That's a tribute to the province's foresight and recognition of the importance of environmental care in building public trust. It's also an opportunity for all of Canada to learn about program effectiveness going forward.

### WHAT WE LEARNED

Here's what might be useful from the Ontario experience in building the Canada-wide template under VBP+, according to Dan Ferguson. He's a beef producer, Ontario provincial VBP+ co-ordinator and involved in the national rollout of VBP+.

**Producer benefits.** The Ontario EFP program brought many producers to a greater understanding of their environmental impact on their own properties and on society in general, says Ferguson.

The risk assessment on farm and action



While not mandatory, cattle operations with environmental farm plans are well on their way to meet the stewardship outcomes of VBP+.

plans works well and establishes a priority for driving farm improvements. Workshops kept producers abreast of initiatives and program criteria.

Collectively this dramatically improved land management and conservation. And the public gets a better understanding of farming's proactive stance and can judge for themselves the track record.

**Public views of EFP.** Mostly the public can only feel good about the progress under EFPs, says Ferguson. "The key is to get messages into a format that consumers can see and understand. Having a plan that shows our best practices and highlights our diligence and ingenuity is a great step forward in social conscience."

**Most effective actions.** The most significant actions under EFP were in terms of water quality and soil health. That included

everything from farm well management to riparian areas to managing manure, controlling run-off, pasture management and cattle watering systems.

As well, producers got a much better understanding of indirect risks such as management of pesticides, petroleum and fertilizers.

**EFP and VBP+.** More producers these days understand VBP's food safety origins. The enhanced version now provides a one-stop shop for proof of involvement in all aspects of sustainable production including environment, says Ferguson.

One clear message is producers want a way to reach consumers with effective messaging about the things they are doing for the benefit of all of society.

### NATIONAL PROGRESS

There is progress nationally.

New research on the beef industry's environmental footprint will help anchor messaging and programming. A benchmark of farms fed into the recent environmental life cycle analysis released in October 2016. And there is continual progress under VBP+ in accommodating the differences in the EFP programs in provinces across Canada.

Producers can expect that the added module for land management and conservation is built clearly on the solid foundation of environmental farm plans. Ferguson believes the Ontario experience can be a valuable part of that.



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