

MEDIA RELEASE

Organic Farm's Need for Good Soil, Water Aided by Cost Share Program

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Every farmer knows that healthy soil is the most important part of any agricultural enterprise. With its balance of minerals, air and water, organic matter and all forms of life, healthy soil is an organism by itself. From the certified organic farmer's viewpoint, it's worthy of the utmost care and attention.

Eric and Maria Oellinger of Belleterre Farms Inc. in Paincourt, near Chatham, who have been certified organic farmers for 10 years, are well aware of the benefits of healthy soil and a good water source. They farm 380 acres, growing organic spelt, several varieties of food grade soybeans, and corn for both livestock and human consumption. Oellinger markets his own crops and deals directly with his buyers.

Originally from Austria, the Oellingers came to Canada 19 years ago. After farming conventionally for a couple of years, they decided to make the change to certified organic. They were inspired by their homeland which, at 12 per cent, has one of the highest percentages of certified organic farms in the world.

Oellinger first prepared an Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) for his operation about 10 years ago and more recently completed the Third Edition EFP, qualifying him for funding available through the Canada-Ontario Environmental Farm Plan Cost-Share Programs.

These programs are supported by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs under the Agricultural Policy Framework (APF), a federal/provincial/territorial initiative. Applications and approval for the cost-share programs are delivered through the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA).

During 2006, Oellinger participated in all three of the cost-share programs—Canada-Ontario Farm Stewardship Program (COFSP), Greencover Canada (GC) and Tier 1 of Canada-Ontario Water Supply Expansion Program (COWSEP).

Oellinger uses a variety of biological solutions, essentially plant food, in crop production. Some are foliar applications for growth enhancement; others for disease control. Their preparation requires a clean uncontaminated source of water. Oellinger could access the municipal water which now surrounds his acreage, but the chlorine and fluoride in the water would destroy beneficial bacteria that are part of the biological solutions.

COWSEP provided Oellinger with the opportunity to drill a new 87-ft deep well in the shale underlying his land. During the growing season he maintains a large tank of 1200 gallons of water, warmed by the sun, available as required.

This water is also used in his composting process. He composts manure from area farms, spraying with water and a fish emulsion to speed up the process. COWSEP covers 33 per cent of eligible costs associated with establishing a new well for agricultural purposes, up to \$5000. "Farming organically, I use less water than I would if I were farming conventionally, so there are benefits for water conservation too", Oellinger adds.

Tier 1 of COWSEP proved extremely popular to Ontario producers when it was announced in September 2005. Within about one year, the original budget available for farm projects was fully allocated. Recognizing the demand would continue, the partnership of AAFC, OMAFRA and the Ontario Farm Environmental Coalition were successful in securing another \$2.2 million to continue the initiative. This effectively doubled the initial budget allocated for the Ontario program.

Crop rotations, composting and intercropping are some of the sustainable farming techniques used on the farm. Oellinger explains, "We work with nature to strengthen the whole farm, starting with the soil. Enhancing the biological life in the soil improves its health, which in turn produces healthy plants, healthy animals and healthy people."

Oellinger uses cover crops to enhance soil organic matter, hold nitrogen in the soil over winter, and reduce soil erosion. Under COFSP (category 15), Oellinger was able to purchase rye and red clover seed to supplement his cover cropping rotation. This category covers 30% up to \$5000 of the total cost. "I have my soil analysed every three years by an independent soil lab, and the results show that soil nutrients are improving over time. It also lets me see where I need to make improvements," Oellinger notes.

Taking advantage of German technology, Oellinger uses a seeder mounted on what is essentially a farm-sized roto-tiller that tills the soil depending on the residue present, drops the seed and tamps it in, all in one pass. The result minimizes both soil disturbance and compaction. Cost-share through category 14 (Improved Cropping Systems) of COFSP offers 30 per cent on the specialized components to support the no-till capability, up to a maximum of \$15,000.

"Certified organic agriculture also considers the interrelations between the farm and the surrounding natural landscape", says Oellinger. So it comes as no surprise to learn that Oellinger's interest in stewardship extends beyond the boundaries of his own land. As a member of the Ministry of Natural Resources Chatham-Kent Stewardship Council, he is currently involved in working to establish forest cover and restore wetlands where feasible throughout the Chatham-Kent area.

This ties in well with Oellinger's fourth cost-share project under Greencover Canada (category 19). His goal is to eventually have trees planted on all his property boundaries. With annual plantings of 1000 trees, he is creating windbreaks to improve the microclimate for growing crops. GC enabled Oellinger to supplement his own tree-planting efforts with an additional 2600 trees at 50 per cent cost share to a maximum of \$10,000. "I prefer white cedar, because I can plant crops right up to the edge of the trees, and cedar doesn't compete with the crop for nutrients," Oellinger advises.

Oellinger sums up his philosophy towards farming, and his respect for the land, quite simply. "We should farm the land to leave it in better condition than how we found it."