

Industry tackles environment – together

How do we balance agriculture's economic benefit with its environmental impact?



FRONT ROW – SITTING, LEFT TO RIGHT:
GLENN LOGAN,
PAGE PENNEY STUART,
BILL STEWART,
BRUCE BEATTIE,
DOUG HALL,
JOHN TACKABERRY

BACK ROW – STANDING, LEFT TO RIGHT:
TERRY RACHUK, GARY NASON, KEN DITZLER,
NICO VAN DER GIESSEN, AARON FALKENBERG,
GARY LILGE, DAVID OSEEN, ANDREW CULLEN,
JAKOB SCHUTTER, CHRISTINE MITZNER,
JACK SWAINSON, BOB NELSON, CHARLES RYPIEN,
DENNIS NANNINGA, GREG CONN, COLIN KURE,
HAROLD UNRUH, ROGER BRYAN

MISSING:
ANDREW HUDSON,
PAT JAMES,
GERRY LEWIS,
PAUL MURPHY,
JOHN KOLK

Carefully. This team of industry players is showing how.

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A healthy environment is clean air, healthy soil and pure water. Caring for these resources is what environmental stewardship is all about. But, with the incursion of agriculture and increasing urban sprawl, how can we ensure Alberta's resources sustain a growing population?

In 1997, these concerns brought 29 people from all sectors of Alberta's agriculture and food industry together to form the Alberta Environmentally Sustainable Agriculture Council (AESAC). Comprising leaders from the food processing sector, commodity groups, crop producers, the Environmental Law Centre, and

representatives from three levels of government, AESA directs a \$5 million budget to programs that make agriculture production and food manufacturing more environmentally sustainable.

What makes the program unique is its membership. "We know our industry impacts the environment," says AESA Chair and dairy producer, Bruce Beattie.

"We also know we can't afford complacency anywhere in the food production chain. Everything we do is connected to each other, and ultimately to the consuming public. AESA brings us together under one umbrella to

innovate and communicate. And, it creates a level of co-operation and commitment that is very powerful." Alberta pork producer, Doug Hall agrees. "Being on the AESA Council gives us an opportunity to tell our story and listen to the concerns of others. Many of our challenges are not unique. Through a combined effort, we often come up with complementary activities that make a difference."

Burrowing owls and potato peelings

If project activity is any indication, AESA is on the agriculture environmental front line. From burrowing owls and duck-friendly cereal crops, to converting potato peel waste; it's a varied list, but it represents just a smattering of initiatives running from one end of the province to the other. This year, over 628 farm-based projects are tackling everything from ecosystems services like purifying water resources, protecting soil and cycling nutrients to biodiversity programs that protect and conserve wildlife habitat.

Nine major waste management projects are underway at Alberta food manufacturing plants. They're exploring new and commercially viable ways to recycle waste, reduce landfills and manage water quality.

One example is a dairy plant with operations in Calgary and Lethbridge that has reduced its yearly water consumption by 68 million gallons - that's a benefit to everyone.

Soil quality is being monitored at 43 benchmark sites to determine the risk of change in soil quality with various management practices. At the same time, AESA is monitoring stream water

quality in 23 water-sheds in low-, medium- and high-intensity agricultural sites to measure change and promote effective environmental practices.

A Green Plan

One of the most effective AESA initiatives is a self-assessment tool that producers use to evaluate their environmental performance. And, it's a tool that is being embraced by financial institutions and other industries like real estate and oil and gas. "Many lenders are now insisting that producers have demonstrated environmental due diligence by completing an environmental plan," says Carol Bettac, AESA Program Manager.



"The plan takes a holistic approach to environmental planning and includes everything from manure management to crop protection use and storage, and more. In fact, anything on the farm that can impact the environment is included in the assessment." Once farmers complete the assessment, AESA will provide resources to tackle any areas that might need improvement.

"I think the goal of most producers is to have minimal impact on the environment and to be viewed as a positive force ..." says AESA member and pork producer Doug Hall. "We have to approach the concerns of the public proactively."

Four parts - one goal:
Environmental Sustainability

AESA funnels its efforts into four activity streams.

1. On the farm ...

Programs on the farm are designed to promote better management practices by farmers and ranchers and to reduce environmental impact right on the farm.

2. At food processors ...

Plant waste, water use and energy consumption are the major environmental challenges in food manufacturing. AESA directs funding and expertise to food processors

committed to finding innovative ways to manage them.

3. Resource Monitoring

In partnership with government agencies and industry partners, AESA is constantly monitoring natural resource quality in low-, medium- and high-intensity agricultural areas.

4. Applied Research

AESA directs resources through the Alberta Agriculture Research Institute (AARI) to conduct studies that explore new technologies for producers and processors to reduce natural resource impact and to manage waste.