

Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership

Competitive. Innovative. Resilient.

Environmental Farm Plan Modernization Consultations

Final Report – July 2024



Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

The Ontario Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) has a 30-year history of helping farm families increase their environmental awareness and develop realistic action plans to improve the environmental conditions on their farms. As the industry celebrates this important milestone, the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) conducted consultations on the modernization of the program.¹ The goal of modernization is to help to ensure that the EFP continues to meet the needs of farm families and agri-food stakeholders while also protecting the environment.

A diversity of industry representatives was consulted, including:

- Farmers
- Representatives of farm and commodity organizations
- OSCIA Field Staff
- Value chain staff
- Conservation authorities
- Government employees
- Environmental NGO and sustainability organization representatives
- An EFP delivery agent from another province

Over 700 touchpoints occurred through a launch session, a survey, workshops, and interviews.

The top benefits of the EFP program are as follows (Figure 1):



Figure 1. Benefits of the EFP program according to survey respondents (n=560).

As Ontario looks to the future of the EFP, it has the opportunity to build on this strong foundation to create add-ons as capacity allows to meet emerging industry and market demands. The EFP would remain voluntary, and farmers could opt to participate in the different pillars based on their needs and interests. The five potential pillars are:

- Education, which would remain the core of the program
- Financial incentives (e.g., cost-share program funding eligibility)
- Aggregated and anonymous data sharing to allow for:
 - Benchmarking with peers
 - Telling Ontario agriculture's sustainability story
 - Informing industry priorities

¹ This work is funded by the governments of Canada and Ontario through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership (Sustainable CAP).

- Streamlining sustainability and quality assurance programming in the Ontario agricultural industry by:
 - Reducing duplication of effort between sector-specific quality assurance programs (e.g., Dairy Farmers of Ontario's use of the EFP as part of its proAction program)
 - Supporting market access opportunities
- Carbon market access to provide farmers with an additional income stream²

Recommendations and next steps

Core program

1. Regularly update the workbook to ensure continued alignment with:
 - a. Regulatory changes
 - b. Industry priorities
 - c. The latest scientific research
 - d. The diversity of the industry (i.e., different sectors and production systems)
2. Bolster the environmental sustainability focus with a discussion of the interconnected economic and social sustainability pillars.
3. Develop self-assessment tools (e.g., habitat and biodiversity, GHG emissions) to enable participants to deepen their understanding of their environmental impacts and opportunities for incremental improvements.
4. Offer increased supports (e.g., technical assistance, increased peer-to-peer learning opportunities) for implementing action plans.
5. Continue to offer both in-person and virtual workshops with evening and/or weekend options.
6. Streamline the user experience with the eEFP, including for renewals.
7. Explore additional incentives for renewing the EFP, such as farm gate signs to commemorate renewals.
8. Develop a communications plan to increase participation in the EFP program.

Financial incentives

9. Develop a communications plan to promote the EFP to insurance companies, lenders, and financial institutions serving the Ontario agricultural industry. Highlight opportunities for collaboration on financial incentives for farmers with EFPs.

Aggregated and anonymous data sharing

10. Consider the collection of data on the farm sizes of EFP participants to help better understand and promote the impact of the program across the province.

² This pillar would require a greenhouse gas tool and an audit process for participating farmers before any exploratory work could begin.

11. Conduct further research into best practices related to aggregated and anonymous data sharing.
12. Explore the possibility of a data-sharing pilot project with the Dairy Farmers of Ontario.³

Streamlining sustainability and quality assurance programming

13. Conduct an environmental scan of existing quality assurance programming for Ontario farmers to better understand opportunities for collaboration with the EFP program.
14. Explore opportunities with commodity groups and buyers to pilot a program which leverages the EFP to meet market demand for sustainability reporting.⁴



³ The Dairy Farmers of Ontario is interested in “leveraging this data to support producers through marketing and quality assurance programs to support consumer confidence and increased market access.” See [Appendix D](#).

⁴ This pilot could build on the lessons learned to date through the Canadian Agri-food Sustainability Initiative. See Wilton Consulting Group. (2023). Canadian Agri-Food Sustainability Initiative: Final Report. Retrieved from: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e7e45bfb56fd5047d7c235e/t/648211ba23a40e03749d1d98/1686245821854/CASI+Final+Report_Final_April+2023.pdf.

1. Introduction

The Ontario Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) has a long and successful track record of helping farm families increase their environmental awareness and develop realistic action plans to improve the environmental conditions on their farms. As Ontario agricultural industry stakeholders celebrate the 30-year history of the EFP in the province, the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) conducted consultations on the modernization of the program. This work is funded by the governments of Canada and Ontario through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership (Sustainable CAP).

The EFP was developed by the Ontario Farm Environmental Coalition, including:

- Farm & Food Care Ontario (formerly known as AGCare Ontario and the Ontario Farm Animal Council)
- The Christian Farmers' Federation of Ontario
- The Ontario Federation of Agriculture

As part of this process, OSCIA commissioned Wilton Consulting Group to support by consulting representatives of agricultural organizations and the agri-food value chain to identify ways to modernize the EFP. The goal of modernization is to help to ensure that the EFP continues to meet the needs of farm families and agri-food stakeholders while also protecting the environment.

Through these consultations, OSCIA sought to:

- Communicate the opportunity for stakeholder input on the future of the EFP;
- Understand the sector's shifting and emerging needs and priorities and explore the potential of a modernized EFP to meet those needs;
- Work with stakeholders to gather input into a vision for the future of the EFP that will reach more clients, have a greater impact on environmental and other outcomes, and offer greater value to the sector; and
- Create momentum among stakeholders for EFP Modernization to support innovative ideas, grow interest in the program, and generate interest in future modernization activities.

This report:

- Provides an overview of the Ontario EFP, including the level of program uptake and other relevant initiatives underway
- Summarizes the benefits of the EFP
- Identifies opportunities for the future of the Ontario EFP, in terms of the program content, delivery, and ways to amplify the impact of the program
- Presents potential pillars for the program, outlining recommendations and next steps

2. Context

2.1 The Ontario Environmental Farm Plan

The Ontario EFP is a voluntary self-assessment that increases the environmental awareness of up to 23 different areas of the farm. In Ontario, the EFP is delivered by OSCIA and funded through the Sustainable CAP, supported by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness (OMAFRA).

The program began as a pilot project in Ontario in 1993. Following the success of this pilot, other provinces began developing environmental farm plan programs. Today, each of the 10 provinces and the Yukon have EFP programs. The EFP has been recognized as “Canada’s flagship agricultural extension program for environmental education.”⁵

The EFP contains 23 worksheets that analyze all areas of the farm. These worksheets help to identify where environmental risks exist on the farm.

The findings from these worksheets inform an action plan, which outlines the best management practices (BMPs) the farmer plans to implement to reduce the identified environmental risks.



⁵ Canadian Agri-food Policy Institute. (2022). Achieving balance: The future of the environmental farm plan program in Canada. Retrieved from: https://capi-icpa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-06-15-CAPI-EFP-Report_EN.pdf.

2.2 How does it work?

To complete an Ontario EFP, a farmer must attend a two-day workshop (Figure 2). If a farmer is updating their previously verified 3rd or 4th edition of the EFP, they can:

- Complete a two-day workshop,
- Attend a one-day workshop, or
- Complete the update online, using the [eEFP](#).

Once a farmer completes their EFP and OSCIA Client Services Staff confirm it is complete, the farmer can opt to apply for cost-sharing funding to implement best management practices (BMPs) identified in their action plan, if current cost-share funding opportunities exist. (Client Services Staff are the OSCIA Field Staff who are trained to deliver the EFP workshops, as well as to complete the review of participant workbooks and action plans.)

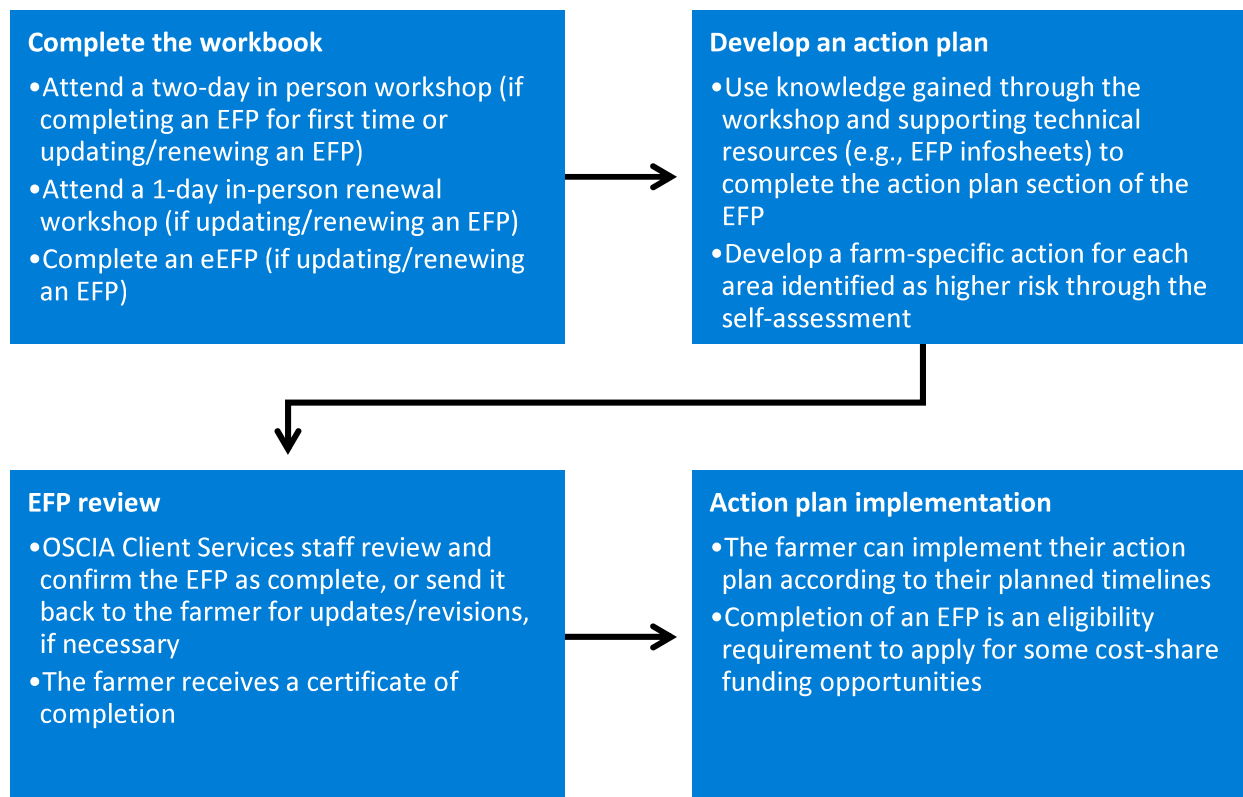


Figure 2. Process and explanation of requirements for an Ontario EFP.

2.3 Program uptake

In total, Statistics Canada estimated 42% of Ontario farms had EFPs as of 2021 and 7% were in the process of developing EFPs.⁶

Compared to other provinces, Ontario ranks fifth in the percentage of farms with EFPs (Figure 3).

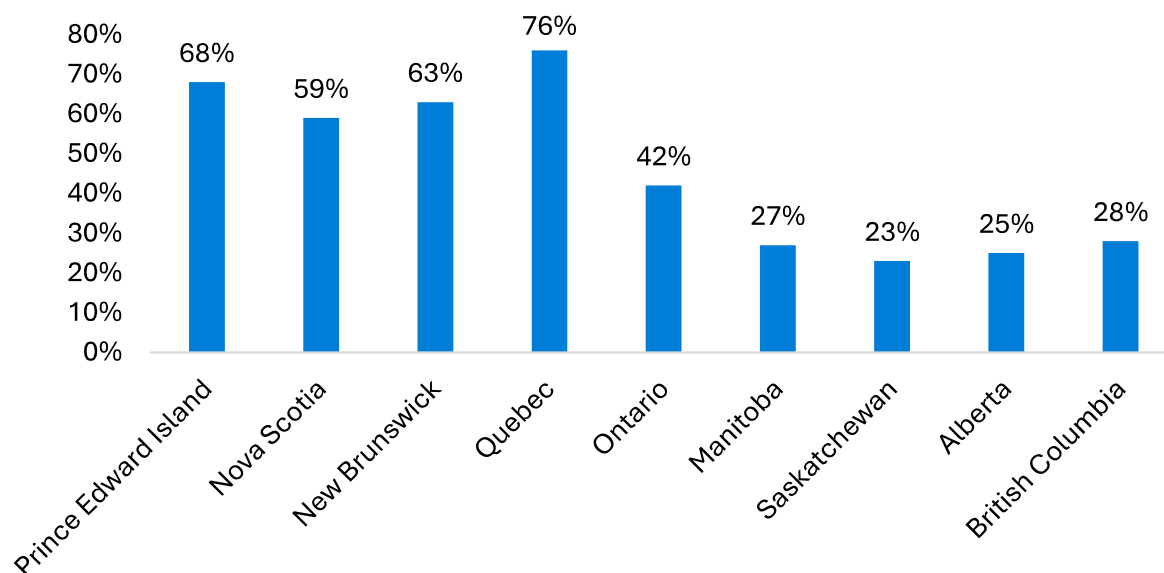


Figure 3. Percent of farms with an EFP, by province (2021).⁷

Of the Ontario farms with EFPs, just over half (54%) have EFPs that were developed less than five years ago (Figure 4). Of these farms, 19% have EFPs that were developed less than two years ago.

⁶ Statistics Canada. (2023). Table 32-10-0205-01 Farms with a formal Environmental Farm Plan. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.25318/3210020501-eng>. Statistics Canada surveys a sample of Canadian farms through the [Farm Management Survey](#) once every five years. The survey generates insights about farm management practices across Canada, including the uptake of EFP programming. The sample size for the 2021 survey was 18,000 farms, and responding to the survey is voluntary. Statistics Canada then creates estimates using the survey findings. Participating farms had sales of at least \$10,000 in 2021.

⁷ Statistics Canada. (2023). Table 32-10-0205-01 Farms with a formal Environmental Farm Plan. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.25318/3210020501-eng>.

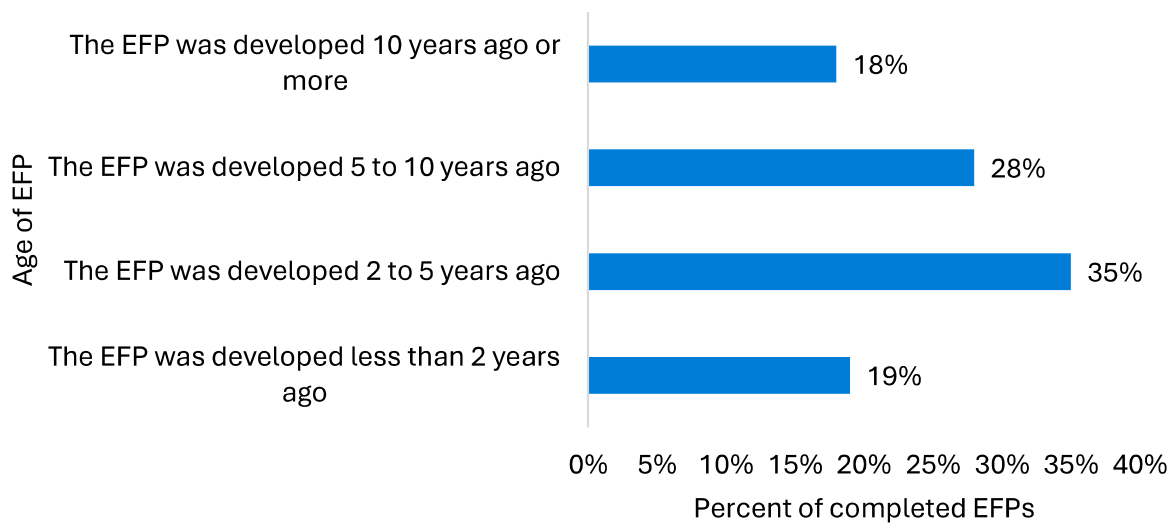


Figure 4. Percent of Ontario farms with EFPs, by age of the EFPs.⁸

The Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association also collects basic information on EFP completion in the province. Between April 1, 2019 and March 31, 2024, over 4,100 Ontario farms completed or renewed their EFPs.

2.4 Other EFP initiatives

OSCIA is coordinating an update of the Fourth Edition Environmental Farm Plan workbook content. The new Fifth Edition workbook will be published in early 2025. This initiative includes coordinating technical and subject-matter experts to review and update existing workbook content and add new content, including:

- Current regulatory requirements,
- Climate change mitigation and adaptation, and
- Biodiversity and species at risk.

The updated Fifth Edition EFP workbook will be published electronically in both English and French. Minor updates will be made to the Fifth Edition workbook annually to support the continuous improvement of workbook content, including updates for regulatory requirements.

OSCIA is also developing and piloting a virtual workshop option to allow participants to complete a new EFP or renew an existing EFP from a remote setting.

⁸ Statistics Canada. (2023). Table 32-10-0205-01 Farms with a formal Environmental Farm Plan. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.25318/3210020501-eng>.

3. Methods

1. Launch session



Over 700 touchpoints with industry representatives through the EFP modernization consultations

Participants included:



Figure 5. Methods used in the EFP modernization consultations, including an overview of participants.⁹

⁹ See [Appendix A](#) for more information on survey respondent demographics and [Appendix B](#) for the key informant interview guide.

A diversity of representatives of the Ontario agricultural industry participated in the consultations. The sectors engaged in the survey are as follows (Figure 6).

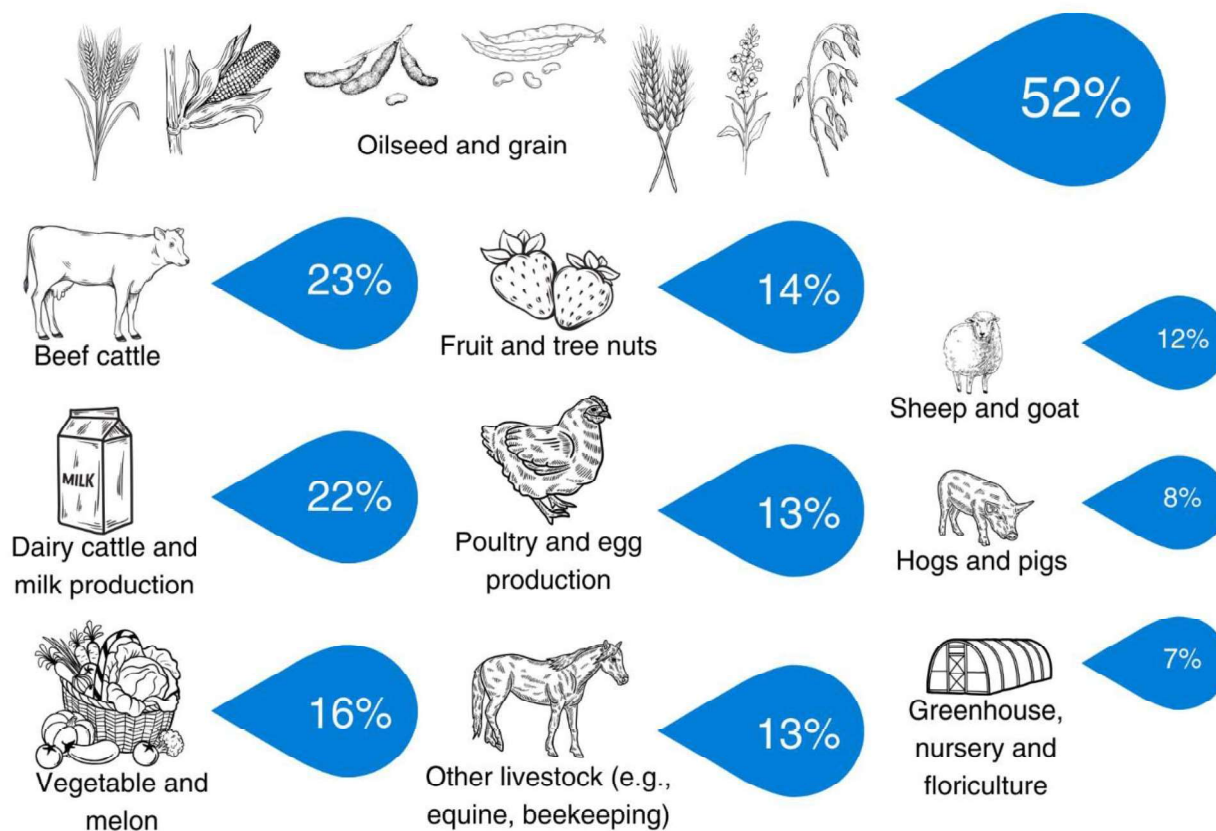


Figure 6. Sectors in which survey respondents were involved (n=448).

4. Findings

4.1 The benefits of the Ontario EFP

The EFP offers many benefits for Ontario farm families. The top benefits are as follows (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Benefits of the EFP program according to survey respondents (n=560).

Other benefits include:

- Demonstrates farmers' environmental stewardship
- Fosters increased trust in the food system
- Peer-to-peer networking and community-building among farmers attending workshops
- The fact the EFP is voluntary
- The opportunity for farmers to benchmark their current practices against best practices
- Fosters pride in the operation and the farm's legacy
- Identifying additional resources to advance the farm's agri-environmental efforts
- Developing an understanding of the planning process (i.e., evaluate, plan, implement, and monitor)
- Aligns with requirements for other industry programs, such as Dairy Farmers of Canada's [proAction](#)
- Enables farmers to identify environmental risks of which they may previously have been unaware

4.2 Content

Soil health and water quality considerations remain important environmental concerns for industry stakeholders. Other top environmental concerns include:

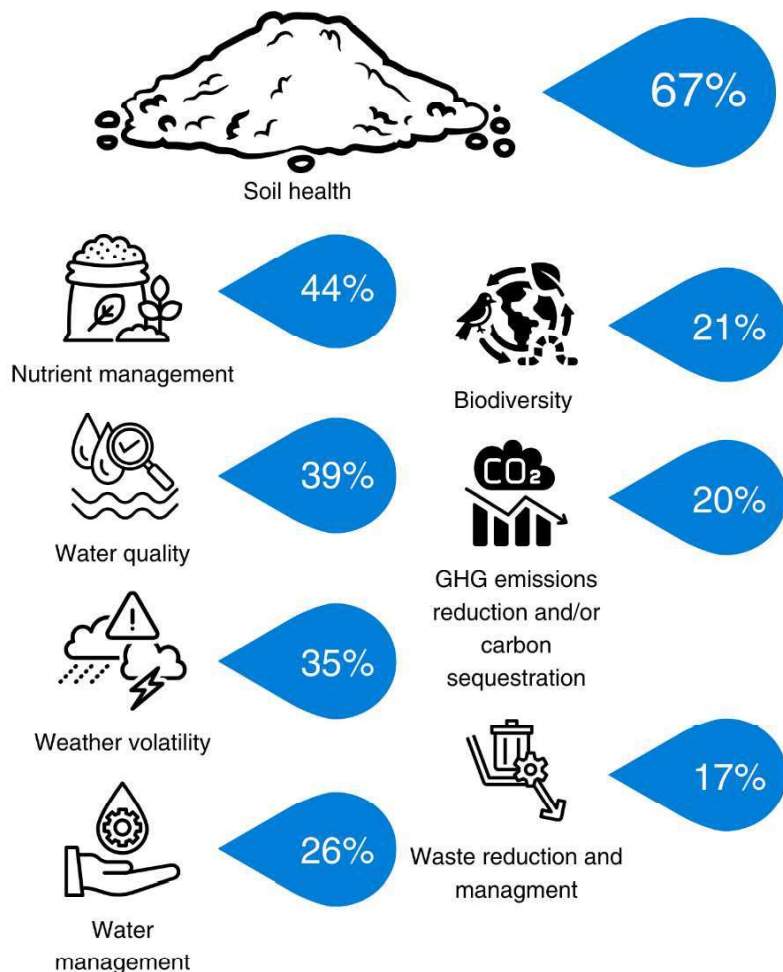
- Nutrient management
- Weather volatility
- GHG emissions reduction¹⁰
- Water management (i.e., lack or excess)¹¹

Weather volatility, GHG emissions reduction, and water management are interconnected with the issue of climate change. As a result, these topics should be addressed in the forthcoming climate change mitigation and GHG emissions worksheet in the Fifth Edition EFP workbook.

As updates are made to the EFP workbook, the content should be revisited to ensure it continues to align with industry priorities and updates to regulations. Relatedly, workbook updates should help to ensure alignment between the EFP program and the latest scientific research. For example, survey respondents were interested in expanded or updated coverage of such topics as:

- Biodiversity
- Integrated pest management (IPM)
- Nutrient management
- Rotational grazing
- Soil health
- Species at risk
- Wetland conservation¹²

Survey respondents' top environmental concerns



*Respondents could select a maximum of three (n=470)

¹⁰ Other recent research highlights the need to “incorporate a climate change mitigation and adaptation lens into EFP programming.” See, for example, Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute. (2022). Achieving balance: The future of the Environmental Farm Plan program in Canada. Retrieved from: <https://capi-icpa.ca/explore/resources/achieving-balance-the-future-of-the-environmental-farm-plan-program-in-canada/>.

¹¹ Other environmental concerns included deforestation, management of invasive species, pesticide use/Integrated Pest Management, plastic management, pollinator health, and urban sprawl.

¹² Industry representatives also shared some specific suggestions of topics to include in a future edition of the EFP workbook. See [Appendix C](#).

While the EFP is focused on environmental sustainability, it should also touch on economic and social sustainability considerations to help demonstrate the return on investment (ROI) of these environmental BMPs where applicable. For example, the three pillars of sustainability (i.e., economic, environmental, and social) could be explained in the introduction to the workbook. Industry representatives are interested in more discussions of the financial impacts of different BMPs. This finding aligns with other recent work in the field.¹³ For example, the Ontario Fruit & Vegetable Growers' Association found that economic/cost savings considerations were the top motivator for its growers to adopt sustainable practices, followed by the desire to be environmentally sustainable.¹⁴

"Updating the content, providing information on ROI (return on investment) from BMP adoption, and improving the accessibility of the EFP for farmers can help address the limitations."

- Survey respondent

Short case studies could be presented in the workshops to explore the ROI, and a special symbol could be used in the workbook to denote content with associated resources about the economic return of the practices. Workshop participants could also be directed to other relevant programming that allow them to dig further into the economic and social sustainability of their farm operations.¹⁵

The workbook does not feel relatable to some sectors, such as:

- Horticulture
- Maple syrup production
- Beekeeping
- Vertical agriculture
- Urban agriculture

An opportunity exists to learn from the EFP programming in other provinces. Alberta, for example, has a [chapter on beekeeping](#).

¹³ See, for example, Rudd, S., Robinson, D., Weigel-Mohamed, I., Owens-Frank, I., Sain, M., & Smith, J. (2023). Principles for increasing adoption of environmental programmes by Ontario producers, 2023. Retrieved from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12742.45128>. See also Drescher, M., & Warriner, G. K. (2022). Environmental concerns and stewardship behaviors among rural landowners: What supports farmers and non-farmers in being good stewards? *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 6: 758426. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2022.758426>. And Farm Management Canada. (2023). Acquiring environmental allies: Increasing the adoption of environmental stewardship practices by Ontario landowners. Retrieved from: <https://fmc-gac.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Project-OAF-2020-101771-Final-Report-January-2023.pdf>.

¹⁴ Relatedly, the greatest challenge for its members to the adoption of sustainable practices "was the cost of sustainable practices, technology, or equipment versus the return on investment." Ontario Fruit & Vegetable Growers' Association. (2023). *Environmental sustainability baseline study*.

¹⁵ For example, the [Growing Your Farm Profits: Planning for Business Success Online Business Self-Assessment Tool](#) is now available through Farm Management Canada.

It can be difficult for a diversified farm to determine the best way to navigate through completing its EFP. Smaller farms, as well as organic, biodynamic, or regenerative farms, might also feel like the workbook is not relatable for their operations. When the workbook is reviewed annually for minor updates, the reviewers should reflect on the diversity of Ontario farms, and how different farmers might navigate through the EFP program. For example, worksheets could be added to better meet the needs of the diversity of sectors in Ontario's agricultural industry.

Over half of survey respondents (56%) said updated worksheets that are relevant for the diversity of Ontario agricultural products would be likely or very likely to increase farmer participation in the EFP program.

It is also important to keep the workbook current; the 4th edition was starting to feel a bit “boring” since it has not been updated since 2013, industry representatives said.

The perception exists that the EFP program is too long and involves too much paperwork. So as updates are made to the workbook, a balance must be stricken between ensuring the content is comprehensive and keeping it as streamlined as possible. Farmer input will be crucial in helping to strike this balance, and in ensuring the content meets industry needs.¹⁶

Truth and reconciliation

The EFP could also be used to help contribute to truth and reconciliation. For example, the workshops could include an Indigenous land acknowledgement, and content and resources could be included on Indigenous agriculture.

Statistics Canada's [Farm Management Survey](#) identifies the following reasons why Ontario farms do not have EFPs:

- Too time consuming (26%)
- Lack of information (20%)
- Too complicated (19%)
- Concern with data privacy and enforcement issues (17%)
- Already participating in other environmental initiatives (8%)
- Other reasons (30%)

¹⁶ Recent literature, too, underscores the importance of regular reviews by stakeholders to help ensure the relevance of environmental programs, as well as their ability “to reduce producer vulnerability.” See Rudd, S., Robinson, D., Weigel-Mohamed, I., Owens-Frank, I., Sain, M., & Smith, J. (2023). Principles for increasing adoption of environmental programmes by Ontario producers, 2023. Retrieved from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12742.45128>.

Further educational opportunities and supports for implementation

While many educational resources are already available to EFP program participants, industry representatives are interested in expanding the scope and type of resources available. For example, the industry is interested in habitat and biodiversity self-assessment tools, as well as tools for farmers to better understand their GHG emissions.

An appetite also exists for increased supports for implementing the action plans. Such supports could include:

- Technical assistance from industry experts (e.g., OMAFA, Ducks Unlimited, conservation authorities)¹⁷
- Information on how to implement BMPs in a more cost-effective way (e.g., hiring contractors with the necessary equipment, rather than purchasing it)
- More targeted information on relevant grants to support the implementation of their action plans
- Networking and peer-to-peer learning opportunities for implementing BMPs
- Links to existing lists of accredited or licensed experts, such as for [soil testing](#) or [tile drainage contractors](#)

Manitoba, for example, has integrated a voluntary GHG emissions tool into its EFP. Users can change their management practices in the tool to understand how the changes impact the emissions from their farm. The tool also incorporates insights on economic considerations and ROI.

Industry representatives underscored that farmers typically work with broader teams, including agronomists, veterinarians, nutritionists, etc. OSCIA Client Services Staff could encourage farmers to consult with their existing advisory teams as they develop and implement their action plans.

¹⁷ Recent literature also identified the need for more on-farm support. See Rudd, S., Robinson, D., Weigel-Mohamed, I., Owens-Frank, I., Sain, M., & Smith, J. (2023). Principles for increasing adoption of environmental programmes by Ontario producers, 2023. Retrieved from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12742.45128>. And Smith, P., Bibik, C., Lazarus, J., Armitage, D., Bradley-Macmillan, C., Kingston, M., Graham, A., Plummer, R., & Summers, R. (2020). Canada's Environmental Farm Plan: Evaluating implementation, use of services, and the influence of social factors. *Sustainable Agriculture Research* 9, no. 4. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.5539/sar.v9n4p1>.

4.3 Delivery

The current process for completing the EFP can feel tedious and complicated, some industry representatives said. The two-day time commitment for the workshops, particularly for the nearly half of farmers who work off-farm,¹⁸ poses another barrier.

About a quarter (26%) of survey respondents said that workshops are not accessible (e.g., too far to travel, lack of evening sessions, lack of virtual options).

Several strategies can be employed to help improve the accessibility of programming, as well as to refresh the delivery format.

The [Grower Pesticide Safety course](#) was heralded for its efforts to accommodate growers. This course is offered in four formats to target different schedules and learning styles.

Both in-person and virtual workshops should be offered across the province, as individual preferences vary for learning platforms, as does internet access. Relatedly, workshop design should be revisited to ensure it accommodates the diversity of learning styles, such as visual and hands-on learners. Virtual offerings could include:

- A mix of modules for participants to complete at their own pace
- Video content
- Peer-to-peer discussion opportunities

Such a diversity of delivery methods should also help to address the concern about ensuring equal access to EFP workshops across the province.

Virtual EFP delivery: Lessons shared by EFP delivery agents in other provinces

EFP delivery agents outside of Ontario provided the following insights based on their experiences with virtual EFPs in their provinces:

- ✓ It is important to ensure technicians/delivery staff are trained and knowledgeable on virtual delivery before launch (e.g., train technicians on the “back end” calculations that the virtual workbook does, so the staff can explain the calculations to farmers if necessary)
- ✓ Consider refining the software so that the EFP renewal process can be streamlined for participants (i.e., so participants can access their “old” workbooks and action plans and update them)
- ✓ The virtual EFP allows participants to track progress on their action plans in real-time

¹⁸ Chen, Zong Jia. (2022). Ontario is an agricultural powerhouse that leads in many farming categories. Statistics Canada. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/96-325-x/2021001/article/00006-eng.htm>.

The virtual workshops could build on EFP's long-standing peer-to-peer learning model to provide more targeted opportunities for such knowledge exchange amongst certain cohorts (Table 1). Over two-thirds of survey respondents said such a delivery format would likely, or very likely, increase farmer participation in the program.¹⁹

Table 1. Sample cohort groupings for virtual EFP workshop delivery.

Cohort	Considerations
Specific commodities²⁰	• Could involve technical experts (e.g., staff from commodity organizations, veterinarians, Certified Crop Advisors, etc.) to highlight relevant BMPs and help answer questions • E.g., greenhouse growers could discuss the challenges they face with the management of their stormwater ponds and share lessons learned
Small-scale farms	• Could target the content to help ensure it feels more relatable to these types of farms
New farmers	• The “fit” of the current EFP workbook can be challenging for new farmers; targeted workshops for these groups can focus on the unique opportunities and challenges they face
Non-operating rural landowners	• Non-operating rural landowners are already engaging in environmental education and initiatives, such as well projects and tree planting, through their local conservation authorities • Could expand the environmental stewardship learning opportunities offered to non-operating rural landowners by offering a stream of the EFP to address such topics as:²¹ ○ Water wells ○ Treatment of household wastewater ○ Water efficiency ○ Energy efficiency ○ Stream, ditch, and floodplain management ○ Wetlands and wildlife ponds ○ Woodlands and wildlife²²

¹⁹ Other industry research also highlights the importance of such peer-to-peer learning opportunities. See, for example, Rudd, S., Robinson, D., Weigel-Mohamed, I., Owens-Frank, I., Sain, M., & Smith, J. (2023). Principles for increasing adoption of environmental programmes by Ontario producers, 2023. Retrieved from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12742.45128>.

²⁰ OSCIA takes a similar approach in the delivery of [commodity-specific biosecurity workshops and webinars](#) for bees, crops and horticulture, livestock, poultry, and mink.

²¹ These landowners are active on Facebook, a representative of a Conservation Authority shared. An online survey that leverages the existing networks of Conservation Authorities and is promoted through Facebook might be the most strategic way to reach this group to gauge their interest in such a program.

²² Other industry research has also highlighted the opportunities associated with offering such an EFP stream. See, for example, Farm Management Canada. (2023). Acquiring environmental allies: Increasing the adoption of environmental stewardship practices by Ontario landowners. Retrieved from: <https://fmc-gac.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Project-OAF-2020-101771-Final-Report-January-2023.pdf>.

Industry representatives underscored the value of learning from peers in a broader diversity of sectors, too, so OSCIA should retain the “general” workshop streams which are open to all commodities. Relatedly, some farms produce multiple commodities; these farmers might see the more “general” stream as a better fit.

Workshops should be offered at different times, such as evenings and weekends, to better accommodate different schedules.

To help foster the view of the EFP as a living document, optional “check-ins” between Client Services Staff and farmers could be initiated to discuss progress towards action plans and identify resources to support with

“The EFP should be a living document instead of something that is just on the shelf.”

- Interviewee

troubleshooting next steps. Such check-ins could be offered between EFP workbook completion and renewal(s).

Core funding should also be provided for the EFP programming so that no breaks occur in the availability of the program.

Ontario fruit and vegetable growers identified networking with peers (e.g., farm tours, farm meetings, conferences, and industry events) as the most helpful resource in facilitating the adoption of more sustainable production practices.

- Ontario Fruit & Vegetable Growers' Association. (2023). Environmental sustainability baseline study.

The eEFP

A more streamlined approach to the eEFP would be beneficial. Based on the introductory questions users complete at the start of the eEFP, logic could be implemented to automatically “filter out” worksheets that are not applicable for their operations.²³ A horticultural producer, for example, does not need to complete the worksheet on the disposal of livestock mortalities, while a cash cropper does not need to complete the worksheet on milking centre washwater. The workbook might feel less daunting if users only saw the subset of relevant worksheets for their operations.

The eEFP could be integrated with other key, relevant websites (e.g., [AgriSuite](#)) to streamline data entry. For example, overlap exists in the content covered in nutrient management strategies/plans and in the EFP. Farmers or their consultants often already reference the EFP workbook when preparing their nutrient

Some farmers still value the hard-copy workbook as an easy reference when filling out other forms and participating in other industry programs. They also noted it was “easy for all members of the family to access.”

Other provinces that have implemented the electronic workbooks, however, show a steady transition to this form of recordkeeping. Alberta, for example, [last used](#) hard-copy workbooks in 2018-19.

If Ontario seeks to help more farmers transition from the hard-copy workbook to the eEFP, technical assistance should be offered as required.

²³ Currently, users must manually indicate if a worksheet is not applicable.

management strategies and plans. Perhaps producers who have already completed EFPs could opt in to prepopulate the relevant sections of their nutrient management strategies and plans (or vice versa).

Artificial intelligence could be leveraged to help provide a “customized” list of resources based on the action plan the user developed. For example, if the user identified areas of concern and actions related to their use and management of manure, their action plan would automatically include a shortlist of relevant educational resources on the topic, as well as potentially relevant funding opportunities to support associated equipment modifications and/or upgrades.²⁴

Renewals

EFP renewals are crucial for several reasons, including to enable participants to:

- Understand any changes in their environmental risks
- Track progress in addressing these risks
- Explore any new topics addressed through an updated edition
- Strive towards continuous incremental improvements

Currently, the main incentive to renew an EFP is to access cost-share funding that requires the completion of this program; a 4th-edition EFP is required for some funding opportunities administered through OSCA, as well as other delivery agents (e.g., conservation authorities).

The concept of instituting a formal renewal requirement (e.g., updating the EFP every five years to be considered a “current” EFP) was concerning for many industry stakeholders. The worry was that this process would be too onerous for farmers. Some individuals suggested that renewals should be prompted by substantive changes in participating farm operations, rather than by a formal timeframe. Others emphasized the importance of incentives to encourage renewals.

One such incentive could be recognition for farmers who have renewed their EFPs. This initiative could be similar to the Junior Farmers’ of Association of Ontario’s [Century Farm Sign program](#), which offers add-ons for milestones after the century mark (e.g., 125 years, 150 years). EFP signs could be made available to showcase the number of renewals, building off the EFP benefit of pride in the operation and its legacy.

“DFO is requesting that the new EFP continue to not have an expiry date. This allows flexibility within our proAction program to utilize the EFP and determine an expiry period that meets national requirements.”

- Dairy Farmers of Ontario decision memo

When farmers are renewing their eEFPs, screening questions could also help them to identify what questions they need to update or complete. For example, if a farm has diversified since it last completed the EFP, the participating farmer(s) may need to complete new worksheets.²⁵ If a

²⁴ Currently, users must manually access a list of resources in the menu bar of the eEFP.

²⁵ A similar suggestion was made in The Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario. (2020). Finding the balance 2020: Farming, development & environmental protection. Retrieved from: <https://www.christianfarmers.org/media/3kql2eni/policy-tour-2020.pdf>. And Farm Management Canada. (2023). Acquiring environmental allies: Increasing the adoption of environmental stewardship practices by Ontario landowners. Retrieved from: <https://fmc-gac.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Project-OAF-2020-101771-Final-Report-January-2023.pdf>.

new edition of the workbook has been released, new questions might have been added to previously completed worksheets. Farmers would also be prompted to update their action plans.

The renewal process could also be revamped by encouraging farmers to participate in other agri-environmental educational sessions (e.g., soil health days, other OSCIA-run activities) to inform the development of their action plans. Such continuing education could be offered as another option to the one- or two-day EFP workshops.²⁶ The farmers could apply the knowledge learned through these educational sessions in updating their action plans.

Communications

A clear communications plan is necessary to increase farmer “buy in” to participate in the EFP program. The communications should highlight what the EFP is and how participation will benefit farmers.²⁷

Communications initiatives should highlight success stories coming out of the EFP program, such as the triple-bottom line benefits (i.e., economic, environmental, and social) associated with the implementation of action plans.²⁸

The options for the EFP completion and renewal process should be explained, noting the benefits of the different delivery methods.

Given the EFP’s 30-year history, it is important to identify the value proposition for farmers to renew their EFPs. The communications should emphasize how participation in the EFP renewal process is “fresh” and beneficial.

The EFP could be positioned as a part of transition planning. For example, a member of the older generation and a member of the younger generation could attend together. They could use the workshop as an opportunity for knowledge exchange about BMPs that have already been implemented, and to collaboratively develop an action plan to build on these efforts.

This communications plan should leverage the expertise of the Client Services staff. They can share what has worked well in their communities and the lessons they have learned. Relatedly,

A key message

The EFP program helps farmers to take a holistic approach to thinking about their farms, considering such factors as soil type, farm type, natural features, etc. The program also enables them to think about what they want their farms to be.

²⁶ A similar suggestion was made in: The Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario. (2020). Finding the balance 2020: Farming, development & environmental protection. Retrieved from:

<https://www.christianfarmers.org/media/3kql2enj/policy-tour-2020.pdf>.

²⁷ Other researchers have also highlighted the importance of identifying the personal benefits to participating in an agri-environmental program. See, for example, Rudd, S., Robinson, D., Weigel-Mohamed, I., Owens-Frank, I., Sain, M., & Smith, J. (2023). Principles for increasing adoption of environmental programmes by Ontario producers, 2023. Retrieved from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12742.45128>.

²⁸ Farm Management Canada. (2023). Acquiring environmental allies: Increasing the adoption of environmental stewardship practices by Ontario landowners. Retrieved from: <https://fmc-gac.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Project-OAF-2020-101771-Final-Report-January-2023.pdf>.

EFP participants themselves have shared insights that can be leveraged.²⁹ Ongoing feedback from participants is crucial to ensure the program continues to meet farmers' needs, and that the communications accurately reflect the benefits.

Although certificates of completion for the EFP do not have expiry dates, it can be helpful for farmers to periodically review their worksheets and action plans to ensure the materials are up to date. To facilitate that process, friendly reminders could be sent encourage previous program participants to consider renewing their EFPs. For example, reminders could be sent:

- When a new edition of the workbook is released, and
- At set time frames (e.g., every five years) with prompts for participants to consider what has changed in their operations over that timespan.

Ideally, farmers could select the format of these reminders (e.g., email, text, or phone call), as communication preferences vary.

4.4 Amplifying the impact

It is crucial to amplify the impact of the EFP, in terms of the ROI that it offers to program participants. Farmers must see the value in the program to entice them to invest the time into the work. Most survey respondents (84%) said that additional incentives/rewards for using agri-environmental BMPs would likely or very likely increase farmer participation in the EFP program. These incentives, too, should encourage participants to implement their action plans.

The voluntary nature of the EFP has long been celebrated. Any new initiatives related to the EFP should also be voluntary add-ons so that farmers can opt to participate in the components of the program that best align with their needs and interests.

Barriers and challenges to farmer participation in the EFP program, according to survey respondents

62% said



**Insufficient
ROI**

(e.g., cost-share program design)

48% said



**Lack of incentive
to renew**

(i.e., the lack of major updates to the EFP since 2013)

(n=425)

“EFP should remain a voluntary program with the incentives that are already in place like cost-share funding programs. ... It is always easier to get people involved if it is voluntarily with an incentive.”

- Survey respondent

²⁹ In addition to the findings from this project, see, for example, Smith, P., Bibik, C., Lazarus, J., Armitage, D., Bradley-Macmillan, C., Kingston, M., Graham, A., Plummer, R., & Summers, R. (2020). Canada's Environmental Farm Plan: Evaluating implementation, use of services, and the influence of social factors. *Sustainable Agriculture Research* 9, no. 4. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.5539/sar.v9n4p1>.

These initiatives could include:

- Cost-share access
- Payments for ecological goods and services
- Data sharing
- Streamlining participation in industry sustainability standards and quality-assurance programming

Building on existing industry efforts

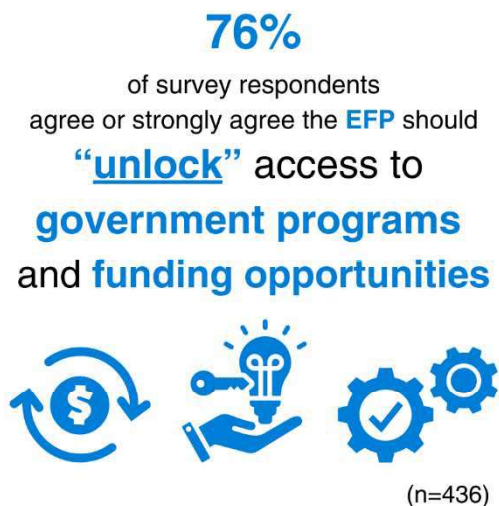
Some Ontario farmers are already leveraging their EFPs to support with such work. For example, a [2010-11 survey](#) of 189 participants found that they used their EFPs to:

- Meet requirements associated with the Nutrient Management Act (20%)
- Qualify for other programs or certifications (8%)
- Secure favourable insurance premiums or loan rates (3%)

Cost-share access

Historically, the core incentive for participating in the EFP program was the access to cost-share funding it provided. Farmers continue to leverage the funding opportunities afforded through the EFP. However, this incentive has notable limitations:

- It is finite (i.e., insufficient funding is available to support projects undertaken by all EFP program participants)
- It is typically geared to landowners, and many farmers rent land³⁰
- Motivation to renew an EFP might be reduced if a previous cost-share funding application was unsuccessful
- The tight timelines for submitting funding applications do not always provide a sufficient timeframe for completing/renewing EFPs
- The possibility of positioning the program as a simple “box-checking exercise” to access funding³¹



The positive connection between the EFP and access to cost-share funding could be strengthened by:

- Lengthening the intake times for funding applications

³⁰ In 2021, 32% of Ontario farms reported renting or leasing land from others. See Statistics Canada. (2023). Census of Agriculture. Table: 32-10-0234-01. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3210023401>.

³¹ Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute. (2022). Achieving balance: The future of the Environmental Farm Plan program in Canada. Retrieved from: <https://capi-icpa.ca/explore/resources/achieving-balance-the-future-of-the-environmental-farm-plan-program-in-canada/>.

- Ensuring relevant funding opportunities are clearly communicated to program participants
- Offering supports for farmers through the cost-share application process, including providing feedback on unsuccessful funding applications
- Continuing to ensure funding programs align with farmers' needs
- Ensuring that funding is available to support farmers who are already implementing BMPs
- Periodically reviewing the cost-share breakdown, and maximum amount available, to ensure a balance is struck between incentivizing participation in the EFP program while ensuring funding is available for a broad range and number of projects

Other financial incentives for ecological goods and services

Over half of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the EFP should be used to access payments for ecological goods and services. Ideas of such financial incentives included:

- Discounts on insurance (e.g., crop insurance)
- Carbon tax incentives
- Incentives from lenders and financial institutions (e.g., [Farm Credit Canada's Sustainability Incentive Program](#), which offers annual payments for customers participating in such programs as the Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef and Ducks Unlimited Canada's Marginal Areas program, as well as customers who have 4R plans)

Most survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed the EFP should be used to:

59% 

Access payments for ecological goods and services

(n=436)

Data sharing

Currently, the data in each farm's EFP is private; each EFP is only reviewed confidentially by OSCIA Client Services staff. This confidentiality is seen as a key strength of the program. However, society is increasingly moving towards an emphasis on measurement, reporting, and verification (MRV) in discussions of sustainability. An opportunity exists to leverage aggregated EFP data for such purposes as:

- Enabling producers to benchmark themselves to their peers
- Telling Ontario agriculture's sustainability story
- Informing industry priorities

The top four factors that would help to ensure value for data sharing, according to survey respondents:



*Respondents could select all that apply (n=387)

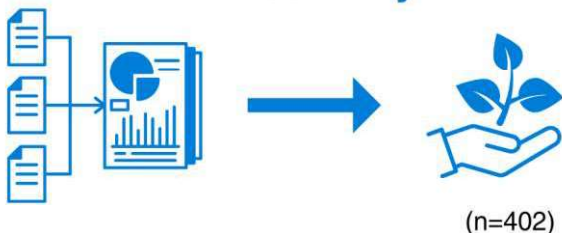
48%

of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that, by

aggregating data

from Ontario EFPs, the agricultural industry could develop a clear plan

to improve its environmental sustainability.



Tracking the impact of the EFP

Currently, Statistics Canada estimates the number of farms with EFPs, and OSCIA counts the number of EFPs issued certificated of completion. To better understand the reach of the program, the farm sizes of participants could be tracked. The total acreage represented could be highlighted in public-facing communications. Regular reports, such as those compiled in [Alberta](#), could highlight accomplishments through the Ontario EFP program.

Benchmarking

Farmers could opt to benchmark themselves to their peers to better understand their sustainability strengths and opportunities for improvement. Initially, this benchmarking would likely have to be simply with other Ontario farmers. Over time, as the dataset becomes more robust, an opportunity could develop to for farmers to benchmark themselves to a more targeted cohort of their peers, such as farms producing similar commodities or farms of a similar size.

Telling Ontario agriculture's sustainability story

The aggregated data could be used to help educate the public about the environmental practices in which the industry shines and where efforts are continuing to advance. Commodity organizations would be well positioned to help interpret and contextualize the data. It could be used by farm groups, commodity associations, and other organizations that focus on public trust to support their existing initiatives.

"I'm excited about being able to 'tell the story.' The aggregated data is key in helping to demonstrate that the industry is doing the right things and is headed in the right direction."

- Workshop participant

In telling this story, it is important to avoid greenwashing (i.e., misleading statements overemphasizing the sustainability of Ontario farms without the associated evidence).

The EFP as a marketing tool?

In Newfoundland, farmers making direct-to-consumer sales use their EFP signs to show that their operations are environmentally sustainable. This opportunity was also explored for Ontario. (While Ontario has EFP signs, the program is not broadly recognized by consumers in the province.)

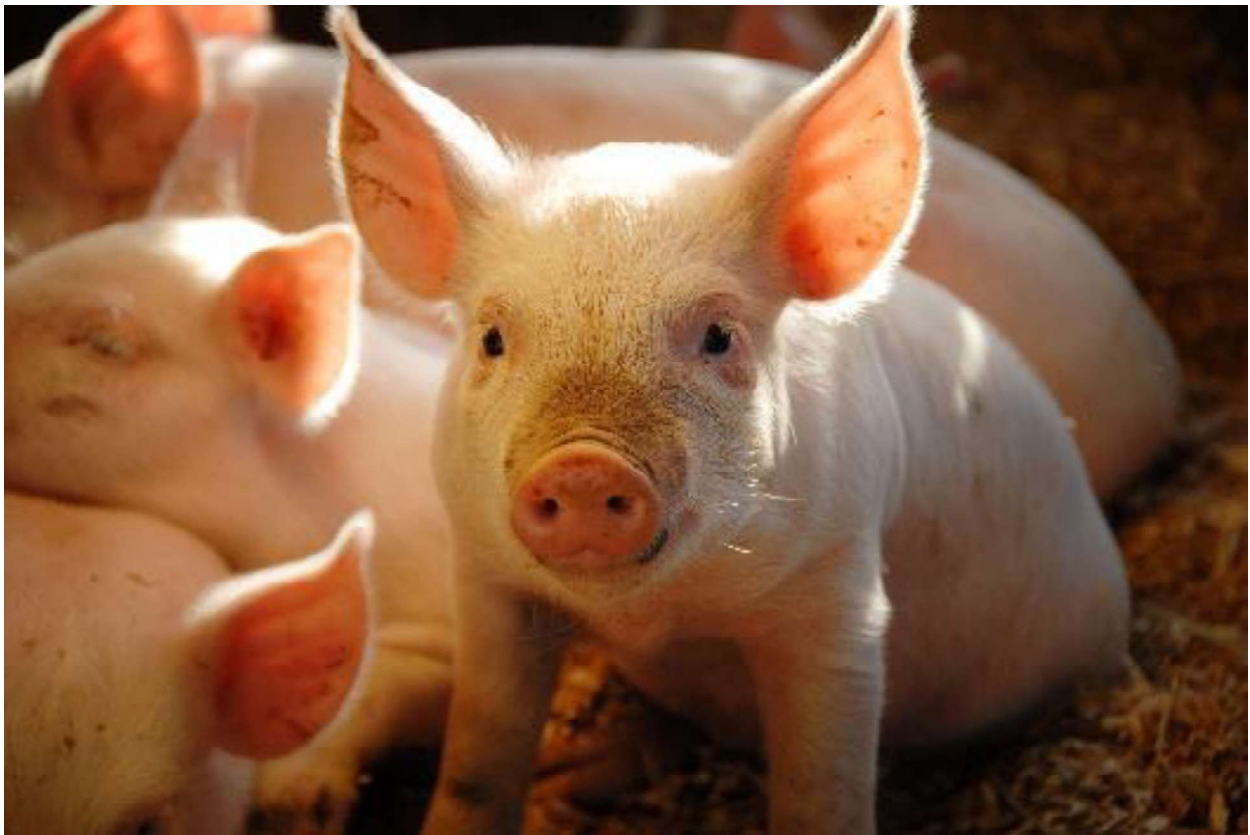
Many other programs and initiatives (e.g., [Foodland Ontario](#), [Certified Organic](#), etc.) exist to support direct-to-consumer sales. Promoting the EFP itself as a marketing tool risks adding to the “noise” that consumers have to navigate. A more strategic approach to this marketing or public trust work could be using the aggregated data to help tell the industry’s sustainability story within existing initiatives (e.g., Egg Farmers of Ontario’s [Get Cracking](#), Grain Farmers of Ontario’s [Good in Every Grain](#), [Ontario Pork](#)).

Most survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed the EFP should be used to:

66% 

Serve as a marketing tool for farmers to demonstrate environmental sustainability

(n=436)



Informing industry priorities

The data could be used to inform priorities for:

- Knowledge translation and transfer
- Technical support
- Funding programs
- Further research

The aggregated data could provide a clearer sense of key opportunities for improvement, enabling stakeholders to prioritize their financial and human resources for these areas.

Concerns about data sharing

Concerns about data sharing include:

- Data ownership
- Data access
- The fear of repercussions (e.g., penalties for low ratings, concerns about the possibility of triggering inspections)
- Protecting confidentiality (e.g., in sectors with a smaller number of operations)
- Cybersecurity breaches
- The use of data to compare operations of different sizes, or different sectors, to “rank” levels of sustainability
- Limitations in the representativeness of the data (e.g., because of the current level of participation in the EFP, because a portion of participants would opt not to share, etc.)
- Freedom of Information requests

“Farmers in general are quite skeptical of sharing farm information. Data confidentiality helps farmers feel more comfortable filling out the EFP accurately so that environmental improvements are more likely to actually happen.”

- Survey respondent

Setting data-sharing up for success

Views about aggregated and anonymous data sharing are mixed. Some industry representatives say that farmers are increasingly accepting of this practice. Comfort level may vary by commodity and level of experience to date with data sharing. It is crucial to understand the associated concerns, work to mitigate them, and proceed mindfully and cautiously with any next steps.

The hard copy workbooks are not conducive to aggregated data-sharing; the eEFP would need to have more widespread uptake.

The best practices presented in the [Ag Data Transparent](#) core principles could help to inform the approach to aggregated data management.

It should be decided whether EFP program participants would have the choice to “opt in” (i.e., the farmer decides to share) or “opt out” (i.e., the farmer decides not to share). Benefits and drawbacks assist with each model; the former, for example, gives the user more choice, while the latter increases the chances of building a more robust aggregated dataset.

Ongoing education and communications are crucial to ensure Ontario farmers understand the value of aggregated and anonymous data-sharing, and how their privacy is protected. This information should be included on the eEFP webpage, as well as addressed briefly in the workshops.

Maintaining and leveraging the strong connections between farmers, farm organizations, and commodity associations is important as work in this area progresses. For example, commodity associations could be consulted to:

- Identify a shortlist of priority risk assessments on which to collect aggregated data
- Determine the types of “cohorts” to identify through the data aggregation process (e.g., commodity, region, farm size)
- Determine who would be eligible to access aggregated data (e.g., farm groups, commodity associations, researchers)

Spotlight: Egg Farmers of Canada’s National Environmental Sustainability and Technology Tool (NESTT)

Egg Farmers of Canada (EFC) collaborated with researchers to develop [NESTT](#), which enables egg farmers to complete sustainability assessments of their operations. Farmers can benchmark their operations with their peers, develop sustainability goals, and track their progress towards these goals. Users can see how the implementation of different green technologies such as solar panels would impact their environmental footprints, and access educational resources.

Users can opt in to share their aggregated and anonymous data with EFC and the research team. This data can be used to help:

- Better understand where the industry is at in its sustainability journey
- Inform updates to the benchmark
- Identify areas for future research

Streamlining participation in sustainability standards and quality assurance programming

Increasingly, farmers are participating in mandatory and voluntary sustainability standards and quality assurance programming.

Several other agri-environmental or agricultural sustainability programs already require participants to complete EFPs. Such programs include:

- Some stewardship programs offered through local Conservation Authorities, such as the [Clean Water Program](#)
- Dairy Farmers of Canada’s [proAction](#), which is a national quality assurance program for dairy farmers
- The [Ontario Corn Fed Beef Quality Assurance Program](#)³²

46%

of the survey respondents indicated that their sectors participate in



**sustainability or
assurance programs.**



Of these respondents,

**24% indicated mandatory participation and
22% voluntary.**

(n=431)

³² A completed EFP is also helpful for beef producers who want to become certified in [Verified Beef Production Plus](#).

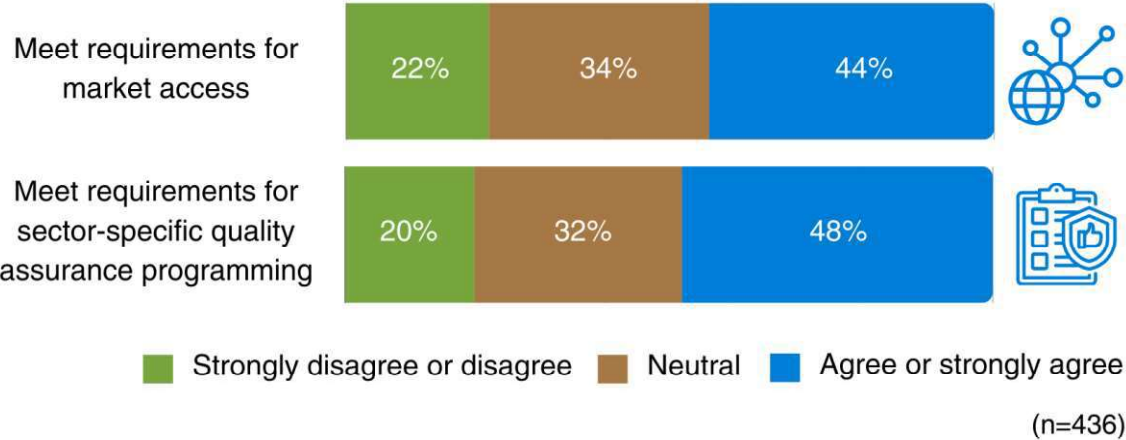
The use of the EFP to address the environmental sustainability elements in other programs offers several benefits, including:

- Targeted education on environmental risks and BMPs
- A streamlining of effort, reducing duplication between programs and supporting the efficient use of resources (e.g., commodity organizations can focus their efforts on other aspects of their quality assurance programming, such as animal welfare and food safety)
- Reducing paperwork for participating farmers

“The linkages to other programs, and industry environmental sustainability is extremely important... People need to see the why of doing the EFP.”

- Workshop participant

Survey respondents had mixed views regarding the use of the EFP to:



The concern was raised that such uses would be asking the EFP to serve too many purposes, since it is primarily intended to serve as a voluntary educational tool. Some industry representatives were worried that, by leveraging the EFP in such a way, it might shift to become a mandatory program.

Others underscored the significant amount of overlap that exists between the EFP and sustainability programs. Benchmarking the EFP to these programs or using the EFP to fulfil a component of these programs can help to streamline the amount of paperwork that farmers need to complete.

Some differences in views existed between sectors. For example, in terms of whether the EFP should be used to meet requirements for sector-specific quality assurance programming, a higher percentage of survey respondents involved in the hogs and pigs sector (59%), as well as respondents involved in the poultry and egg sector (55%), agreed with this statement. In contrast, the percentage of respondents who agreed was lower in the oilseed and grain (39%), greenhouse, nursery and floriculture (30%), and vegetable and melons (28%) sectors. An opportunity could exist for further consultations with the pork and poultry sectors to explore potential synergies with sector-specific programming (Table 2).

Table 2. Sector-specific quality assurance programming in the pork and poultry sectors.

Sector	Program
Pork	Canadian Pork Excellence program
Chicken	Raised by a Canadian Farmer program
Eggs	• Egg Quality Assurance program • National Environmental Sustainability and Technology Tool ("NESTT")
Turkeys	Turkey Farmers of Canada On-Farm Programs

Over half (56%) of survey respondents from the dairy cattle and milk production sector agreed that the EFP should be used to meet requirements for sector-specific quality assurance programming, suggesting they see value in the requirement for farmers participating in proAction to have a current EFP.

As sustainability and quality assurance programming continues to evolve, it is important to foster collaboration between these stakeholders and the EFP program leadership. For example, if the EFP will be leveraged to help streamline participation in another program, the definitions of key terms should align in both programs to help avoid confusion.

Over half (55%) of EFP workshop participants between January 1, 2019 and March 31, 2024 were dairy producers. This extent of engagement underscores the value of sector-specific programming in helping to foster participation in the EFP program.

Another consideration is differences in program design. While the EFP content is typically practice based, industry programs are trending more towards a focus on outcomes. It must be explored how the different approaches can be reconciled to help reduce the amount of paperwork Ontario farmers must complete.

Tapping into carbon markets

Ontario farmers are also interested in the opportunities with carbon markets. In the longer term, the EFP could potentially assist with this work. For example, if the EFP had an associated, voluntary GHG tool, and the possibility for verification, carbon markets could leverage these tools to work with farmers.

Spotlight: Alberta's EFP+

Alberta's EFP program is delivered by the Agricultural Research Extension Council of Alberta (ARECA), a not-for-profit organization dedicated to supporting a network of applied research and extension associations to connect producers to programs, services, innovations and research to improve the profitability and sustainability of their farm businesses.

Farmers in Alberta can complete their EFPs completely online or online with in-person support. A farmer starts by registering for their EFP and providing basic information about their operation. Next, their online Webbook is created and made accessible through the EFP portal. Once the account is activated, the farmer is assigned a technician from their region who can provide one-on-one support to help complete the EFP. Finally, the farmer completes their online workbook and build their tailored action plan for their farm. Farmers have access to their technicians even after their EFP is completed.

When completing their EFP, if they are selling to an interested buyer, the farmer has the option to complete an [EFP+](#), or an 'upgraded' version of the program. The EFP+ provides producers with a recognized equivalency score with [SAI Platform's Farm Sustainability Assessment \(FSA\)](#) program. By completing the EFP+, farmers can collaborate with their farm management group to make sustainability claims that are internationally recognized and aligned with the FSA.

The EFP+ program currently has two farm management groups:

- [Rahr Malting Co.](#), which purchases barley from Alberta producers
- [Alberta Sugar Beet Growers](#)

Other companies and commodity groups are also exploring the opportunities associated with the EFP+.

Benefits:

- ✓ Farmers can choose to participate in EFP+
- ✓ The EFP serves as a "market ready" tool for farmers to demonstrate sustainability if their buyers demand alignment with the FSA
- ✓ The EFP+ add-on can take up to an additional hour to complete, once the "regular" EFP content is completed
- ✓ FSA is designed for farmers around the world, while the EFP+ is designed for farmers who operate in Alberta



Verification

Sustainability standards and quality assurance programs typically include an audit process to verify the information shared in the program paperwork.

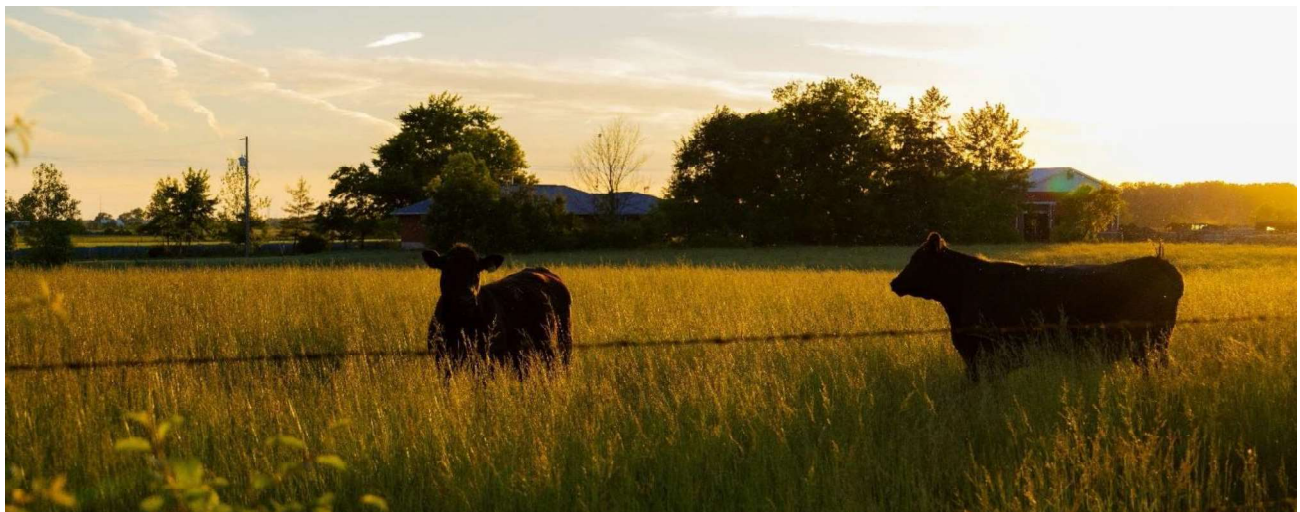
To bolster opportunities for the EFP to help streamline participation in these other industry programs, farmers could opt to complete an additional step of a third-party audit (i.e., someone further removed than the OSCIA Client Services staff, who currently review the EFP for completeness). The audit would confirm the accuracy of the self-assessment and could help with identifying corrective actions (i.e., how to address the farms' higher risk ratings). Such third-party verification would provide enhanced credibility.

Concerns about this possibility include:

- The initiation of such a voluntary add-on could deter some farmers from participating in the EFP program more generally
- The EFP becoming more onerous for participants
- EFP data being shared with stakeholders that provide regulatory oversight (e.g., with the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks)
- The associated costs, and who will cover them
- The broader shortage of auditors in the industry and the lack of consistency in auditors
- That the EFP would move away from its farmer-centred approach as it would be helping to meet the needs of the downstream supply chain

“As organizations in the Canadian agricultural industry work to implement commodity-based sustainability initiatives, the EFP can play a greater role in demonstrating environmental efforts at the farm level. The EFP should be benchmarked to industry programs to demonstrate alignment. Then, stakeholders involved in EFP programming and commodity-based sustainability efforts should collaborate to ensure the balancing of the EFP’s strong agri-environmental educational opportunities with sustainability initiatives’ needs for verification.”

- Canadian Agri-food Policy Institute. (2022). [Achieving Balance: The future of the environmental farm plan program in Canada.](#)

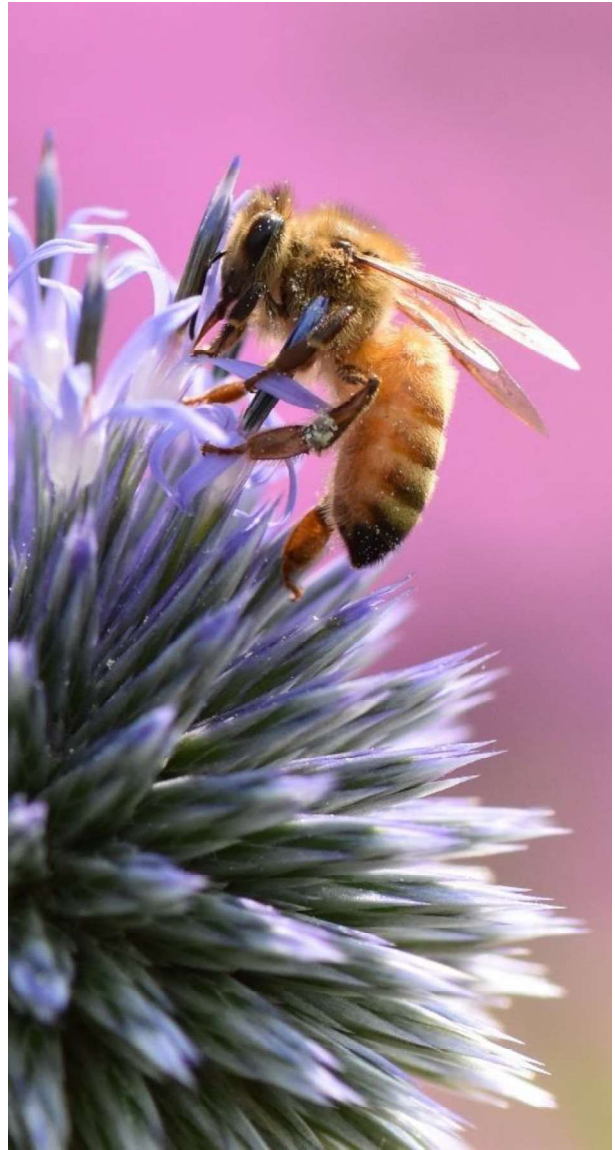


To help ensure the success of any verification pilot project, the following actions should be undertaken:

- A strong communications plan should be developed to explain:
 - The voluntary nature of the audits
 - The purpose of, and reasons for, the audits
 - The audit process
 - The benefits
- Consultations with representatives of sustainability standards or quality assurance programs with audits to explore lessons learned
- Careful selection of auditors to ensure a familiarity with agriculture, which can help to foster an opportunity to build trust between farmers and auditors
- The development of strong procedures to ensure consistency in the verification process between farms and to address instances where corrective action is needed

Ideally, the add-on EFP audit would be streamlined with the audits for other key programs, so that farmers would only need to undergo one audit.

EFP stakeholders could explore opportunities with commodity groups and buyers to pilot streamlining participation in sustainability standards and quality assurance programs through the EFP. In this pilot, OSCIA could serve as the third-party service provider that assists with the reporting and ensures the confidentiality of individual data from participating producers.



Spotlight: Supply chain perspectives in the Ontario grains and oilseeds sector

Although not yet universal, buyers in the grains and oilseeds sector are increasingly demanding sustainability information from their suppliers. For example, key markets with sustainability demands include buyers from Japan, EU markets for food and fuel from grains, and milling companies.

Interviewees shared that their buyers are looking for sustainability information, including:

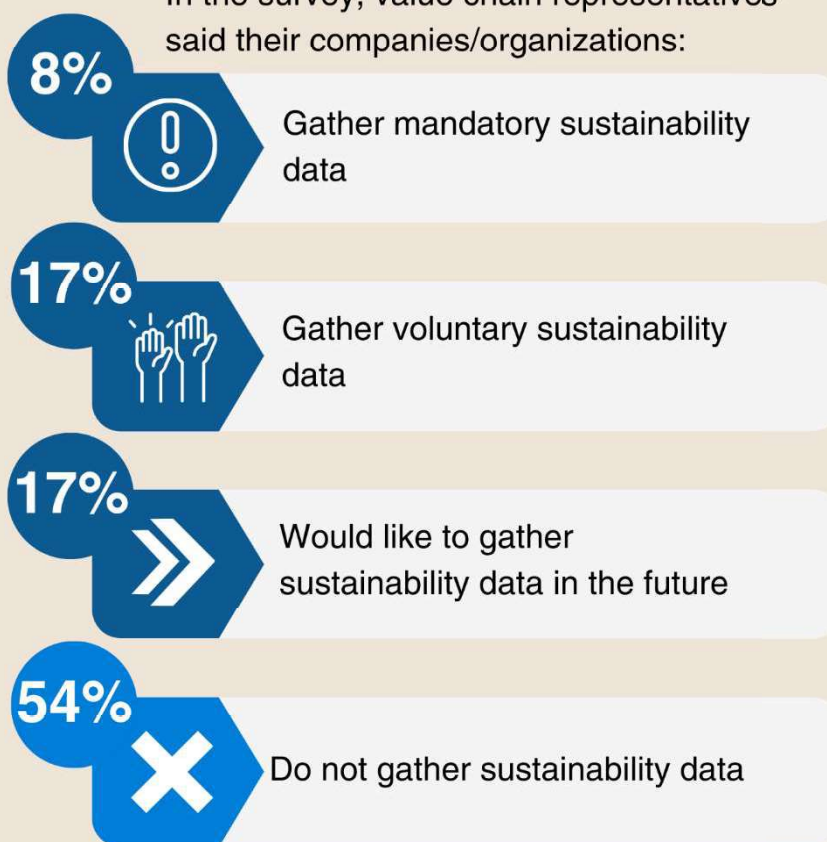
- ✓ Fertilizer use
- ✓ Fuel use
- ✓ Carbon footprint quantification
- ✓ 4R nutrient stewardship efforts
- ✓ Regenerative agriculture practices

In response to market demands, grains and oilseed companies are turning to sustainability programming to provide assurance. For example, interviewees noted SAI Platform's Farm Sustainability Assessment (FSA) program, International Sustainability & Carbon Certification's ethanol program, and Soy Canada's sustainable soy program.

Grain buyers are hiring staff with sustainability programming expertise and creating sustainability departments to support in meeting industry demands.

While grains and oilseed companies work towards providing sustainability assurances, many challenges still exist. Key challenges include:

In the survey, value chain representatives said their companies/organizations:



*Please note 4% were uncertain (n=24)

Verification and auditing:

Farmers already face verification/auditing requirements related for other programs or certifications (e.g., organic certification). Industry stakeholders are mindful of the time and cost required to verify sustainability claims at the farm level.

Rewarding farmers: Widespread opportunities for grain farmers to receive premiums for their sustainability reporting have yet to be realized. While some companies provide incentives to farmers, these structures are often confidential to maintain competitiveness within the industry.

Capturing other efforts: Most grains and oilseeds sector stakeholders seek information related to carbon accounting. Good value-chain structures do not exist for rewarding farmers for BMPs that offer other benefits for the environment, economy and communities.

Canadian competitive advantage: Interviewees discussed the need for streamlined national programming that accounts for regional specificity to keep up with international competitors.

Opportunities for the EFP to support the grains and oilseed sector:

- ✓ Help aggregate sector data
- ✓ Support with emissions quantification by integrating existing tools
- ✓ Enable market access, similar to EFP+ programming in Alberta
- ✓ Help share information about uptake of environmental BMPs across the sector



5. Potential pillars, recommendations and next steps

Potential pillars

The EFP has a 30-year history of enabling Ontario farmers to increase their knowledge of agri-environmental BMPs and reduce their environmental risks. As Ontario looks to the future of the EFP, it has the opportunity to build on this strong foundation to create add-ons as capacity allows to meet emerging industry and market demands. The EFP would remain voluntary, and farmers could opt to participate in the different pillars based on their needs and interests (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Potential pillars for the future of the Ontario EFP.

Recommendations and next steps

Core program

1. Regularly update the workbook to ensure continued alignment with:
 - a. Regulatory changes
 - b. Industry priorities
 - c. The latest scientific research
 - d. The diversity of the industry (i.e., different sectors and production systems)
2. Bolster the environmental sustainability focus with a discussion of the interconnected economic and social sustainability pillars.
3. Develop self-assessment tools (e.g., habitat and biodiversity, GHG emissions) to enable participants to deepen their understanding of their environmental impacts and opportunities for incremental improvements.
4. Offer increased supports (e.g., technical assistance, increased peer-to-peer learning opportunities) for implementing action plans.
 - a. Pilot optional “check-ins” between Client Services Staff and farmers to discuss progress on action plans.
5. Continue to offer both in-person and virtual workshops with evening and/or weekend options.
 - a. Pilot virtual workshops for unique cohorts (e.g., specific commodities, small-scale farms, new farmers, non-operating rural landowners).
6. Streamline the user experience with the eEFP, including for renewals.
 - a. Apply logic to the introductory questions to filter the workbooks the user sees to the ones relevant for their operation.
 - b. Integrate other websites (e.g., AgriSuite) to reduce data entry.
 - c. Leverage artificial intelligence to assist with this work (e.g., to provide targeted resource and funding program suggestions).
7. Explore additional incentives for renewing the EFP, such as farm gate signs to commemorate renewals.
8. Develop a communications plan to increase participation in the EFP program.

Financial incentives

9. Develop a communications plan to promote the EFP to insurance companies, lenders, and financial institutions serving the Ontario agricultural industry. Highlight opportunities for collaboration on financial incentives for farmers with EFPs.

Aggregated and anonymous data sharing

10. Consider the collection of data on the farm sizes of EFP participants to help better understand and promote the impact of the program across the province.
11. Conduct further research into best practices related to aggregated and anonymous data sharing.
 - a. Consult farm groups and commodity organizations to inform any possible next steps.

12. Explore the possibility of a data-sharing pilot program with the Dairy Farmers of Ontario.³³

Streamlining sustainability standards and quality assurance programming

13. Conduct an environmental scan of existing quality assurance programming for Ontario farmers to better understand opportunities for collaboration with the EFP program.
14. Explore opportunities with commodity groups and buyers to pilot a program which leverages the EFP to meet market demand for sustainability reporting.³⁴

³³ The Dairy Farmers of Ontario is interested in "leveraging this data to support producers through marketing and quality assurance programs to support consumer confidence and increased market access." See [Appendix D](#).

³⁴ This pilot could build on the lessons learned to date through the Canadian Agri-food Sustainability Initiative. See Wilton Consulting Group. (2023). Canadian Agri-Food Sustainability Initiative: Final Report. Retrieved from: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e7e45bfb56fd5047d7c235e/t/648211ba23a40e03749d1d98/1686245821854/CASI+Final+Report_Final_April+2023.pdf.

6. Appendices

Appendix A: Survey respondent demographics

A total of 570 respondents participated in the survey. The respondents were mostly:

- Farmers (79%)
- 55 or over (44%)
- In the oilseed and grain sector (52%)
- Familiar with the EFP (49%)

Age of all survey respondents		
Under 35	35 to 54	55 or over
17%	37%	44%

Figure 9. Age of respondents (n=564).

Age		
	Farmer survey respondents	All farm operators in Ontario
Under 35	17%	8%
35 to 54	37%	29%
55 or over	44%	62%

Figure 10. Age of farmer survey respondents (n=443) compared to age of Ontario farm operators. Source: Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0381-01 Characteristics of farm operators: Age, sex and number of operators on the farm, Census of Agriculture, 2021. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3210038101>.

Role in industry	
Farmer	79%
Agricultural organization representative	19%
Value chain representative	5%
Environmental NGO or sustainability organization representative	4%
Government employee	4%
Other:	9%
• Farm advisor/consultant	
• Beekeeper	
• Conservation Authority representative	
• Landowner	
• Agricultural retailer	
• Researcher/academic	

Figure 11. Survey respondents by role in the industry (n=570).

Level of familiarity			
Not at all familiar	Slightly familiar	Familiar	Extremely familiar
6%	26%	49%	20%

Figure 12. Survey respondents' level of familiarity with the EFP program (n=567).

Over half of the respondents had completed the 4th edition EFP. Of the respondents with EFPs, 87% had completed the program themselves. (The remainder of respondents shared that other family members completed the EFPs.)

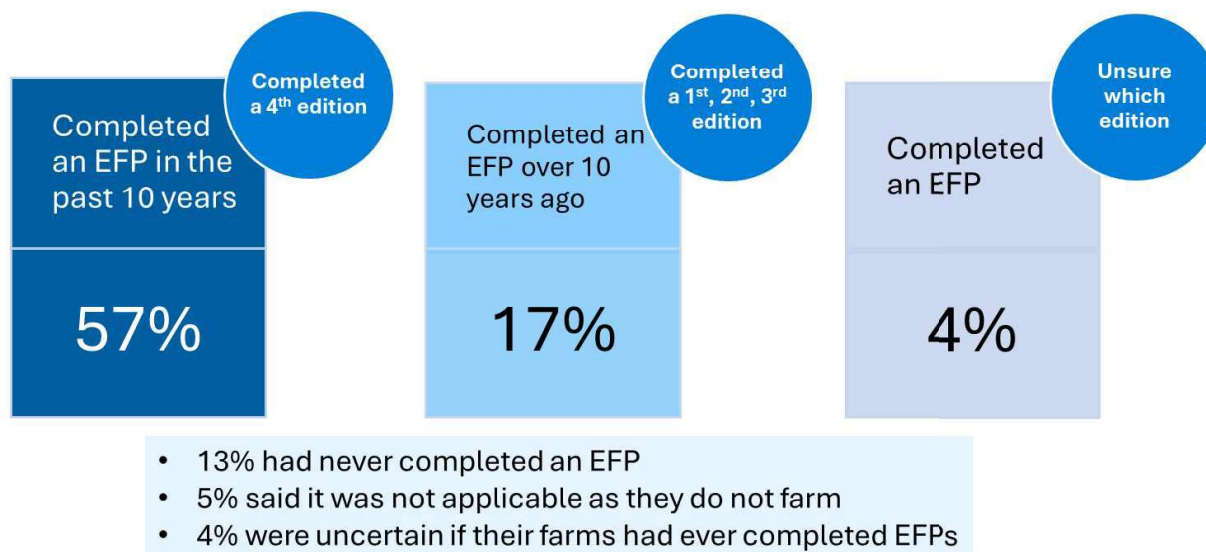


Figure 13. Respondents' experience with the EFP (n=445).

Who completed their EFP?			
Please note respondents could select multiple options			
Themselves	A member of the previous generation (e.g., parent)	Another member of their generation (e.g., sibling)	Other (e.g., children)
87%	10%	10%	7%

Figure 14. Who completed the respondents' EFP (n=326).

Appendix B: Key informant interview guide

Preamble

For farm groups/commodity organizations

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview.

Our team at Wilton Consulting Group is supporting the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) with the Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) Modernization Consultations. The purpose of this interview is to inform the modernization of Ontario's EFP program. This modernization will help to ensure that the EFP continues to meet the needs of farm families and agri-food stakeholders while also protecting the environment.

Today, we want to hear your insights about:

- Opportunities to overcome challenges and barriers to participation in the EFP
- The possibility of data sharing
- The possibility of streamlining reporting for quality assurance and/or sustainability initiatives

This interview will be confidential. The findings from this interview will help to inform the report, which will be public facing. Any quotes used in the report will be genericized and anonymous.

The interview is expected to take up to 30 minutes.

Can I answer any questions before we begin?

For the value chain

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview.

Our team at Wilton Consulting Group is supporting OSCIA with the EFP Modernization Consultations.

The Ontario EFP is a voluntary self-assessment that increases the environmental awareness of up to 23 different areas of the farm, including:

- Fertilizer and pesticide handling and storage
- Manure management and
- Disposal of farm waste

These worksheets help identify where environmental risks exist on the farm. The findings from these worksheets inform an action plan, which outlines the best management practices the farmer plans to implement to reduce the identified environmental risks.

In Ontario, the EFP is delivered by OSCIA and funded through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

The purpose of this interview is to inform the modernization of Ontario's EFP program. This modernization will help to ensure that the EFP continues to meet the needs of farm families and agri-food stakeholders while also protecting the environment.

Today, we want to hear your insights about:

- Your participation in voluntary or mandatory quality assurance or sustainability programs
- The sustainability data your organization/company collects, or would like to collect

This interview will be confidential. The findings from this interview will help to inform the report, which will be public facing. Any quotes used in the report will be genericized and anonymous.

The interview is expected to take up to 30 minutes.

Can I answer any questions before we begin?

Questions

For farm groups/commodity organizations

1. Please tell us a bit about yourself, your role, and your connections to the EFP.
2. How could the EFP program be improved to help increase farmer participation? Please feel free to comment on the workbook content and/or the workshop model.
3. How could the EFP be leveraged alongside other industry initiatives to streamline agri-environmental education and reporting?
4. Currently, the data in each farm's EFP is private. As part of the consultations, we have been exploring the idea of aggregated data sharing. Almost half (48%) of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that, by aggregating data from Ontario's EFPs, the agricultural industry could develop a clear plan to improve its environmental sustainability. In general, do you think your members would be open to the idea of the sharing of data (i.e., practice-based information) at an aggregated level? Why or why not?
5. How could the EFP program help to ensure farmer confidence in such aggregated data sharing?
6. Do you foresee aggregated data from the EFP being useful for your organization? Why or why not?
7. Can you please suggest an organization or company further upstream in the supply chain that we should connect with?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share with us to help inform the modernization of the EFP?

For the value chain

1. Please tell us a bit about yourself, your role, and your organization's/company's sustainability priorities.
2. Do your suppliers participate in voluntary or mandatory quality assurance or sustainability programs? If so, which programs?
3. Does your company/organization gather sustainability data from your supply chain? If so, what type of data do you collect? How do you collect it?
4. *If the interviewee answered yes to Q3:* Can you please share how your suppliers have responded to the request for sustainability data? What concerns were raised, and how did you help to mitigate these concerns?
5. Do you see any opportunities or value in the possibility of aggregating and/or streamlining sustainability data reporting through the EFP program? Why or why not?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share with us to help inform the modernization of the EFP?

Appendix C: Potential topics for inclusion in future editions of the EFP

Through the engagement activities, industry representatives shared the following topics for consideration for inclusion in future editions of the EFP. In no particular order, the topics include:

- Pollinator health
 - The timing of crop protection product applications to limit the potential impact on pollinators
 - The selection of crop protection products that are less toxic to pollinators
 - The importance of communication with local beekeepers
- Creating pollinator habitat (including in buffer strips, through cover crop selection, etc.)³⁵
- The benefits of pollinators for crop production
- Clean energy production, including solar and wind
- Opportunities to transition from the use of fossil fuels to more electric-powered tools
- The climate change mitigation associated with soil carbon sequestration activities
- Carbon markets
- Drones
 - Nuisance considerations
 - Disposal
- Aquaculture

³⁵ This resource could be helpful for this work: Pollinator Partnership Canada's [Technical guide for preserving and creating habitat for pollinators on Ontario's Farms](#).

Decision memo DAIRY FARMERS OF ONTARIO

DATE: May 23, 2024

TO: WILTON CONSULTING GROUP

FROM: DFO Quality Assurance Committee

SUBJECT: **ENVIRONMENTAL FARM PLAN (EFP) MODERNIZATION STAKEHOLDER INPUT CONSULTATION**

The DFO Quality Assurance Committee met yesterday and supports the following comments for consideration as our stakeholder contribution towards the EFP modernization report. DFO values the opportunity to provide comments on this matter.

COMMENTS

1. Continue with the EFP options of:
 - The option of an in-person or online workshop renewal option.
 - A 2 day in person or online workshop completion for new producers or those that have not completed an old EFP.
2. Add the following EFP options:
 - Producers can complete their new EFP electronically or in paper format (with funding support for entering all paper EFPs into the electronic system).
 - To ensure accessibility, DFO will require support for producer to transition to an online EFP (eEFP) for those with limited or no internet access.
 - Producers can participate in the workshop either virtually or in-person (as previously mentioned).
 - Through producer consent, producers will provide EFP data to Dairy Farmers of Ontario.
3. Not define a term for renewal:
 - DFO is requesting that the new EFP continue to not have an expiry date.
 - This allows flexibility within our proAction program to utilize the EFP and determine an expiry period that meets national requirements.
 - During partner consultation meetings a 5-year expiry of the EFP was raised by the consultant to foster discussion.
 - As previous stated DFO does not want the limitation an expiry would create, but see an open expiry date an industry opportunity for other commodities to adopt the EFP as a tool in their accreditation program.
 - EFP renewal is currently a requirement of proAction and as Dairy is currently the only commodity in this position at the time of writing this memo, if an outdate is imposed in Ontario, additional inconsistencies will be created across Canada, so again we request no expiry date.
 - Applying an expiry date would affect all dairy producers (especially those that are new producers)

4. Support the CAPI Policy Brief recommendations:

- Formalize a National Environmental Farm Plan Group through the creation of a National Environmental Farm Plan (NEFP) Alliance.
- Work with federal, provincial and territorial governments to core fund the EFP program for workshop delivery and Cost-Share outcome-based actions.
- Integrate other environmental sustainability program and standards content into the EFP program.
- Incorporate a climate change mitigation and adaptation lens into EFP programming:
 - Align the proAction Environmental Module Questionnaire to answer questions around:
 - Adaptation to climate change and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions
 - Soil Health and Conservation
 - Biodiversity in agriculture
- Develop a national framework to harmonize EFP programming and collection of key data:
 - i. As the EFP is mandatory for Dairy Producers in Ontario, Dairy Farmers of Ontario (DFO) want to leverage this data to support producers through Marketing and Quality Assurance programs to support consumer confidence and increased market access.
 - ii. Provide the opportunity for DFO to require producers to share their eEFP as part of their proAction requirements.

5. OMAFRA to continue supporting red tape reduction efforts to reduce duplication of data entry points and improve efficiency for producers by integrating the eEFP into the existing AgriSuite software.

Currently:

- Dairy Producers are required to have an EFP.
- Phased-in dairy farms are required to have a Nutrient Management Plan.
- Dairy farms that purchase fertilizer from a 4R certified retailer require a 4R Nutrient Stewardship Plan.

Each listed plan contains unique information, but also a significant amount of duplicate data. The integration of the eEFP into the existing AgriSuite OMAFRA software presents an opportunity to:

- streamline data entry,
- reduce duplication,
- provide a comprehensive cross-sector documentation of environmental stewardship and sustainability activities on Ontario farms.
- Provide efficiencies within Dairy Farmers of Canada's proAction Environmental module

6. With these five recommendations, DFO can utilize and leverage EFP information to support several Strategic Priorities, including:

- Nourish and strengthen communities through STEWARDSHIP
- Optimize performance and efficiencies through ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS
- Invest to grow the domestic market through DYNAMIC GROWTH

Appendix E: References

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