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ALUS E-Newsletter

Alternative Land Use Services

Growing a healthier environment

THE VALUE OF NATURE FOR AGRICULTURE.....A FARMER'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE ALUS PROGRAM!

When Gunther Csoff became a participant in the ALUS program, he never imagined the benefits would be so diverse.

Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) is a program that recognizes farmers have made a contribution to society by providing ecological goods and services. Benefits of these services include cleaner air and water and wildlife habitat. ALUS provides financial incentives to recognize what landowners have done to better the environment.

Gunther and wife Helga signed on with ALUS in 2010. Their farm is a former tobacco operation that's been in the family since the 1930s. Its 150 acres consists of 45 acres woodlot, 10 acres in ALUS and the remainder in cash and specialty crops, such as sweet corn and Asian squash. In addition, they rent his father's farm next door.

The Csoffs' faces are familiar to many area residents. Gunther served 14 years as a director of the Delhi German Home and Helga is still a volunteer with the hall's ladies' society.

After taking the tobacco buyout, the Csoffs started the search for a replacement crop. Gunther said they are still looking for the "magic bullet" and ALUS is becoming a part of that.

One of the unexpected dividends came for Asian squash. The 2011 season was the first the Csoffs' grew Asian squash so they didn't have good traditional knowledge of bee populations, but Csoff knew that neighbours who grew cucumbers needed to bring in hives for pollination.

His ALUS planting of 10 acres of prairie grass also included some wild flowers. Last summer when walking in the area, the bees were obvious. "The field was literally buzzing when the bees were there." He didn't need to pay for bees to be brought in.

ALUS chairman Bryan Gilvesy said Csoff's experience confirms preliminary results regarding bees from a study by CANPOLIN. That study is tracking if the number of native pollinators increases on ALUS prairie grass plots.

Csoff heard about ALUS from his brother Joe, who had previously enrolled and also does custom prairie grass planting. Gunther had a field where he had grown corn and experienced marginal yields.

That field often required fertilizer boosts through the season when growing tobacco.





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"Now, with corn and beans, you're very limited with what you can do (to add fertilizer after planting)," he said. "If you have a fertilizer problem half-way through the season, it's difficult to tweak it."

He enrolled that field in ALUS, hoping the prairie grass would help stabilize nitrogen levels in adjacent fields. While it's too early to see if the prairie grass paid off, Csoff did use the ALUS revenue to purchase ESN coated fertilizer that releases the nitrogen over time. Csoff is happy with results from the first year.

He is also hopeful the prairie grass will help build up organic matter in the sandy soil.

"I've farmed 30 years and you know there are big risks of losing nitrogen in big rains," he said. "I'd rather be proactive than be regulated."

Csoff is conscious of the environment, enjoying seeing wildlife, birds and the bees on the farm. He noted there is less and less land all the time and believes society has to maximize the use of what's there, but at the same time the farmer needs to make a profit from it

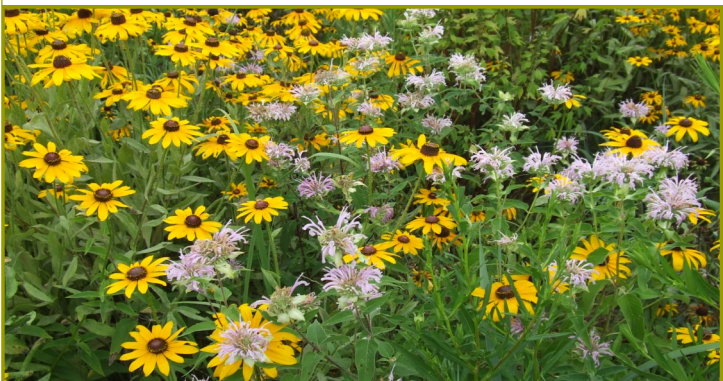
"The farmer can't do it alone," he said. "Society has to support the environmental services farmers bring to the table."

In Norfolk County, 103 farmers enrolled in ALUS to date, signing up 800 acres. Funding from the W. Garfield Weston Foundation is allowing expansion to continue into 2012 and the target is to add 30 landowners, or 210 acres.

"After a successful three-year pilot phase, the Norfolk Alternative Land Use Services Program is continuing to support farmers in providing society with nature's benefits," said ALUS co-ordinator Lindsay Bennett.



From left to right: Gunther Csoff, Lindsay Bennett, Dave Reid and Mark MacNeil standing in Gunther's second year prairie stand.



Anyone interested in learning more about ALUS can contact:

Lindsay Bennett—ALUS Project Coordinator
Phone: (519) 429-5999, ext. 2220
Email: lindsay.bennett@norfolkcounty.ca

Visit our new ALUS National website at
www.ALUS.ca