AGRICULTURE SECTOR WORKING GROUP – MEETING MINUTES

MAY 27, 2016 9:30 AM – 12:00 PM

Outline

Introduction

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) Co-chair of the working group, George McCaw, provided an overview of activities to develop agriculture-related actions for input into the Domestic Action Plan (DAP) for Lake Erie (LE) phosphorus reduction.

- OMAFRA Minister Leal met with agriculture sector leaders on May 10;
- Early Actions are being considered; they include a proposal to further restrict winter spreading and promotion of cover crops, as well as actions by MOECC and MNRF. MOECC's actions are expected to include requirements around sewage treatment plants, septic tanks and storm water management. OMAFRA will also support opportunities related to infrastructure funding, which could be used for sewer expansion in the Leamington and Kingsville areas and for other green infrastructure.

George Mc Caw reminded the attendees that the focus of today's meeting is to hear what the sector has been doing in support of LE phosphorus reduction. The OMAFRA co-chair also briefly discussed the recently-released Ohio Phosphorus Reduction Implementation Plan and its emphasis on focussing limited resources to the most impactful uses, and also reminded the attendees that OMAFRA speakers and materials are available to support presentations / discussions with their boards and membership.

Industry Co-chair, Bruce Kelly, built on an observation made at the last meeting that the sector is already doing a lot to address the nutrients issue, and shared information about a recent trip to visit greenhouses in the Niagara region.

Presentation 1: Grain Farmers of Ontario Update – Debra Conlon

Debora Conlon provided an overview of numerous activities that GFO has recently undertaken in relation to the phosphorus issue:

- GFO circulated to the WG members their organizations magazine articles describing what the bi-lateral commitment means for GFO members, information about their stewardship program and communication efforts.
- In Winter 2014/15 Tom Bruulsema spoke with 150 GFO delegates about the phosphorus issue and the 4Rs program.
- GFO has invested $1.8M in research on agronomic practices and to track progress in order to determine 4Rs effectiveness.
- GFO Board Chair is on the DM Leadership Team and the organization recently met with MOECC on the phosphorus issue.

In a follow-up question about GFO sharing KTT with other organizations, Ms. Conlon indicated that their research program contact has reviewed research projects from this angle and would be happy to connect with other organizations

Presentation 2: 4Rs – Tom Bruulsema (International plant Nutrition institute) and Ron Campbell (Ontario Agri-Business Association (OABA))

Mr. Bruulsema talked about the Better Crops magazine that his organization publishes and the phosphorus-related articles that it contains.

Mr. Campbell provided a comprehensive overview and status of the 4Rs program development in Ontario.

- OABA is one of three partners (together with the Canadian Fertilizer and OMAFRA) that is investing $150,000 over the next three years to develop a 4Rs program for Ontario.
- The following 4Rs activities are taking place:
    - A Steering Committee and technical sub-committees have been set up to develop various aspects of the program;
    - Phase 1 of the 4Rs program implementation includes a pilot project; 21 locations have been selected for the pilot. A team developing the program is considering elements of different 4Rs programs and determining which ones are best suited for Ontario. The Ohio program is the most stringent one in response to a high level of public awareness about the role of Phosphorus in the LE algal bloom issue.
- Once the program is in place there will be a large public event to mark it.

Presentation 3: Ontario Pork (Stefan Larass)

A PowerPoint slide deck was presented.
Key points:

- In 2014, Ontario Pork identified a course of action to "tell our farming story" from a social responsibility perspective
- Six dimensions of Ontario Pork social responsibility: farm management, economic performance, environmental stewardship, animal care and food safety, relationships with the community, workers' well-being
- 2018 will be the next round of measurement and reporting
    - Activity on Great Lakes includes governance, research, consultations and producer involvement in discussions. For example, involvement in the Sustainability Advisory Group, as well as producer involvement in various advisory discussions, including a review of the LENT recommendations

During discussions after the presentation, a question was raised about what feedback the presenter gets (on the presentation) and how the presenter would respond to his membership/audience being dismissive towards the problem and the role of an individual producer in it ('I am a small part of this, nothing to do with the problem…'). The response was that only about 10% of feedback is negative, and to those, the response would be that we all have a role to play and that we all have our share of responsibility. It was also pointed that sharing information on what other sectors are doing is valuable information as it demonstrates that we are all playing our role.

Another point brought up during the presentation was about multiple groups discussing LE problem, and concerns about who will be determining what needs to be done; a specific concern was raised about drainage. It was clarified that other groups – e.g. the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities/OFA drainage initiative – will be brought in to present to this group at the next meeting and that although not an ultimate decision-maker the Agriculture Sector Working Group is and will be a main engagement plank for discussing agriculture-related actions.

Presentations 4 and 5: Greenhouse – Justine Taylor and Jeanine West

PowerPoint presentations with focus on vegetable and floriculture greenhouses (GH) were made.

Key points from the Flowers Canada (Ontario) presentation:

- Farms that discharge nutrient feed water contribute to nitrogen and phosphorus in surface water
- FCO has taken a number of actions, including $1.7 million in applied research projects, participation on the Ontario Greenhouse Environmental Steering Committee, and the hiring of a Water Specialist to support members
- Members prepared over 70 Action Plans to address discharges and any non-compliance

- Growers have found that major infrastructure changes have meant more productivity, better efficiencies, and more flexibility
- Going forward, FCO will support research into more recirculation treatment options, biofilm research, fertilizer requirements, etc.

Key points from the Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers (OGVG) presentation:

- OGVG is committed to ensuring its membership is fully informed on the importance of this issue and delivering meaningful information related to phosphorus in the Great Lakes.
- Efforts of the Ontario Greenhouse Environmental Strategy (OGES) group have been instrumental in defining a strategy for enhanced environmental performance, leading to improvements. For example, since 2010, over 1000 new /existing vegetable greenhouse acres have transitioned to nutrient recirculation.
- This year, OMAFRA and OGVG formed a directed task team focused on one-on-one grower interactions to identify potential barriers to achieving zero discharge production and to offer technical support to growers
- Barriers include: lack of understanding of regulatory requirements, limited window of opportunity, limited access to funds, lack of sufficient storage, equipment failure
- OGVG will continue to address those barriers through grower communication and outreach, good news stories, adaptation and contingency funds, watershed remediation, and sustainable economic development

Presenter points included an estimate that P load coming from GH was estimated at about 40 – 50 MTA in 2010 and is estimated to be 19-26 MTA now. It was underlined that these are rough estimates only based acreage and not on individual greenhouse measurements.

Presentation 6: Upper Thames CA – Craig Merkley

A PowerPoint slide deck was presented on the activities of the Conservation Services Unit started in the 1980s.

Key points:

- Agricultural erosion control: UTRCA surveys, designs and supervises the construction of control structures, e.g. diversion terraces, riparian buffers, strip cropping, sediment basins
- Rural Water Quality Program: offers grants to land owners to undertake stewardship projects
- Research and demonstration projects: offers funding and expertise to work with farmers and implement projects addressing both point and non-point sources
- GLASI priority subwatershed project in North Medway and North Kettle: provides cost-share incentives to implement phosphorus-related best management practices, as well as monitoring water quality and collecting detailed land management data
- Extension: UTRCA staff worked with local landowners this winter to gather stories and advice about soil and water conservation techniques

Presentation 7: Reducing Phosphorus Runoff – Kevin McKague

A PowerPoint slide deck was presented detailing evidence-based recommendations for reducing phosphorus loss from fields.

Key points:

- The majority of phosphorus loss from fields occurs during the non-growing season
- Phosphorus is commonly transported off fields through sediment, overland runoff, or in tile water
    - Erosion control principles include: maintaining good soil cover year-round, reducing soil movement due to tillage action, and protecting vulnerable areas
    - Improve soil infiltration capacity to reduce overland runoff by, for example, reducing soil compaction
    - Minimize use of surface inlets, especially in tilled fields
- Cover crops improve soil structure, water holding capacity and reduce erosion. They are also critical in the non-growing season
- Keep soil phosphorus test results low
- Apply fertilizer and manure at times when there is the least risk of water runoff

A question related to the presentation was asked about what the group should share with their membership if asked about practices whose impact on phosphorus loss is complex (and may even make things worse) such as conservation tillage and cover crops. Advice from a phosphorus loss expert was that we should communicate to agricultural producers that each farm needs to look at its own unique circumstances and risks and identify their own best management practices to reduce phosphorus loss and improve soil health.

Next Steps

- It was suggested that it would be valuable to develop a common set of questions and answers to address the “non-believers” , which could identify what other sectors are doing
- There was strong support to invite the CITIES Initiative to speak on their drainage project at a future meeting
- There was request to have the Terms of Reference recirculated to the Working Group to ensure a common understanding of the role of Working Group and members
- Follow up Phosphorus loss discussions will be integrated into the next Working Group agenda; Working Group members were invited to, in the meantime, share any ideas and suggestions on Phosphorus loss reduction with the group via email
- A reminder was given that all members were invited to the July 6th Lake Erie bus tour being coordinated by Farm and Food Care
- All presentations would be circulated to the members of the Working Group