
HALDIMAND COUNTY

Report EDT-02-2021 Rural Water Quality Program Update

For Consideration by Council in Committee on February 9, 2021



OBJECTIVE:

To seek Council approval for program additions and updated guidelines to Haldimand County's Rural Water Quality Program.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. THAT Report EDT-02-2021 Rural Water Quality Program Update be received;
2. AND THAT the suggested program additions and guideline updates as outlined in Report EDT-02-2021 be approved;
3. AND THAT authority continue to be delegated to the Grand River Conservation Authority, Long Point Region Conservation Authority and Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority to deliver this programming (including the proposed changes) on behalf of Haldimand County.

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Reviewed by: Lidy Romanuk, BA, EcD, Manager, Economic Development and Tourism

Respectfully submitted: Mike Evers, MCIP, RPP, BES, General Manager of Community & Development Services

Approved: Craig Manley, MCIP, RPP, Chief Administrative Officer

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

On November 20, 2019, Haldimand County's Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC) received their annual program update on the Rural Water Quality Program (RWQP) from Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) staff. This program is jointly delivered by Long Point Region Conservation Authority (LPRCA), Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA) and GRCA; however, the GRCA administers the program on behalf of these Conservation Authorities and for Haldimand County. After the presentation concluded committee members asked if there was an opportunity to develop a soil testing category (which would involve multiple new project categories for the program). GRCA staff confirmed this was possible as this is included in RWQPs elsewhere in the watershed and that they would draft and provide options to the AAC for its consideration.

On November 18, 2020, proposed program additions and guideline updates were presented to Haldimand County's Agriculture Advisory Committee by the GRCA. The changes focus on soil testing and management plans that support better field assessment, soil fertility and crop management decisions. During this meeting the group made a motion to have the program updates presented to Council for approval.

BACKGROUND:

The Haldimand Rural Water Quality Program supports rural landowners implementing projects to protect and improve water quality on their property. These projects help to reduce sediment and nutrient delivery to watercourses (phosphorus and nitrogen), reduce bacterial contamination and improve habitat conditions.

The Haldimand County Rural Water Quality Program (RWQP) was established in 2011 and offers cost share grants and incentives to rural land owners. The County annually allocates \$25,000 to this program. Projects that are currently supported by this program include livestock exclusion fencing, erosion control structures, tree planting and natural area restoration, living snow fences, sediment basins, wetland creation and cover crops. Since 2011, there have been 67 projects completed and a total of \$155,543 in grants provided by the County to these projects worth over \$673,000. The Haldimand County Agricultural Advisory Committee serves as the program Review Committee and assesses RWQP project applications against program guidelines for suitability and good use of funds. Conservation Authority staff from LPRCA, NPCA and GRCA regularly attend the Agricultural Advisory Committee meetings to present RWQP projects to the committee. The committee approves or declines the projects based on the eligibility requirements.

On November 20, 2019, Haldimand County's Agricultural Advisory Committee received their annual program update on the Rural Water Quality Program from Grand River Conservation Authority staff. The program is jointly delivered by LPRCA, NPCA and GRCA. The GRCA administers the program on behalf of all Conservation Authorities and for Haldimand County. After the presentation concluded, committee members asked if there was an opportunity to develop a number of programs that would enhance soil testing and the soil fertility of agricultural land that would ultimately lead to improved rural water quality. This request followed a successful soil fertility workshop held in Cayuga in 2019 which was co-hosted by the Grand River Conservation Authority and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs. Soil testing is an important tool that supports crop management decisions. Monitoring soil fertility allows producers to apply crop nutrients at the optimal rate, time and place from an appropriate source to support crop productivity and minimize environmental impacts. The workshop highlighted the benefits of soil fertility testing and encouraged producers to test their soil regularly. The inclusion of a suite of programs to enhance soil fertility in the Haldimand Rural Water Quality Program was identified as a way to increase the practice locally; therefore, the committee approved the recommended changes.

On March 13, 2020, the programs steering committee comprised of Haldimand County's Economic Development and Tourism Staff and Stewardship Staff from the Grand River Conservation Authority, Long Point Region Conservation Authority and Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority met to review the existing program guidelines. Options to promote soil testing through the RWQP were proposed along with suggested changes to the existing cover crop program category.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit resulting in a temporary hiatus of economic development functions with staff focussing on the completion of Haldimand County's Business Recovery Priorities. Conservation Authority staff who administered the Rural Water Quality Program also underwent a similar hiatus. When this program was positioned to resume, staff connected with the Agriculture Advisory Committee to present the proposed changes for consideration. At this time the group made a motion to have the program updates presented to Council for approval.

ANALYSIS:

Discussions with the Agriculture Advisory Committee and Conservation Authority staff resulted in specific programming being developed for Haldimand County with the focus on improved soil health

and water quality. The program (see Attachment 1) has been modeled after successful programs that Conservation Authority staff currently administer in neighbouring jurisdictions.

Overall, the intent of the proposed program changes is to expand the eligible practices available for funding in order to encourage more landowners to voluntarily undertake projects to benefit their operations while also improving water quality. The benefits of improved water quality include a safe secure water supply, a healthy aquatic ecosystem, increased recreational opportunities, sustainable agricultural operations and a vibrant economy. This new program is offered in neighbouring municipalities and supported locally within our watershed. Staff recommend adding the following program categories under the parameters outlined below:

Proposed Program Changes

Additional project categories are proposed to promote soil health and crop nutrient use efficiency. Nutrients applied in the form of fertilizer or manure, are essential for crop production. Nutrients such as Phosphorus can move from fields into surface water with eroded soil or dissolved in runoff. Too much phosphorus in rivers and lakes causes the growth of toxic and nuisance algae. Implementing management practices to improve nutrient use efficiency by closely matching crop needs with available nutrients can help to reduce phosphorus loss and improve water quality. The additions and changes to the RWQP that aim to accomplish these objectives are summarized below.

Soil Testing

- This is a new addition to the Rural Water Quality Program.
- The purpose of this project category is to promote the application of crop nutrient sources to support crop productivity at the proper rate, time and place. The other objective is to minimize potential contamination of ground and surface water.
- Eligible projects include soil sampling and analysis with fertility recommendations.
- The following project details will be considered prior to project approval:
 - Priority is given to fields adjacent to watercourses, wetlands or is systematically tile drained;
 - To encourage new adopters of the practice, to be eligible fields must not have been sampled in the last three years;
 - Sampling and mapping services must be completed under the supervision of a Certified Crop Advisor or an agronomist; and
 - Soil analysis must be done at an Ontario accredited soil testing laboratory.
- Applicants can redeem up to 75% of eligible costs up to \$1,000 per farm business (defined as having a unique Farm Business Registration Number).

(See Attachment 1 for full details.)

Nutrient Management Plans

- This is a new addition to the Rural Water Quality Program.
- A Nutrient Management Plan documents the volume of livestock manure generated on a farm, how it's stored and where, when and at what rate manure/nutrients are applied to fields. The plan balances nutrient applications with crop needs to encourage the most effective use of available nutrient resources, optimize yields, and protect groundwater and surface water.
- Eligible projects include costs associated with the creation of a 3 year Nutrient Management Plan (NMP) created using the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs NMAN software program.
- Applicants can redeem 75% of eligible costs up to \$2,000 per farm business.

(See Attachment 1 for full details.)

Crop Nutrient Plans

- This is a new addition to the Rural Water Quality Program.
- A Crop Nutrient Plan defines where, when and at what rate nutrients are applied taking into consideration existing soil nutrient levels, environmental features and crop needs. The goal is to encourage the most effective use of available nutrient resources, optimize yields, and protect groundwater and surface water on operations without livestock housing.
- Eligible projects include costs associated with the creation of a written crop nutrient plan covering at least one full crop rotation and a minimum of three years that describes the timing, source, placement and rates of all applied nutrients.
- Applicants can redeem 75% of eligible costs up to \$2,000 per farm business.
(See Attachment 1 for full details.)

Cover Crops

- Changes are being proposed to this existing Rural Water Quality Program project category.
- The proposed changes include increasing the number of acres applicants are able to received funding for from 50 to 75 acres.
- The grant rate remains at \$20/acre while increasing the maximum payment for cover crops from \$1,000 to \$1,500 to encourage farmers to try cover crops on more acres or over multiple years.
- The proposed changes include considering grazed cover crops as an eligible project (however this will be assessed on a case by case basis at the discretion of the review committee). The funding for grazed cover crops will be limited to \$10/acre.
- The following program details have also been altered: Crops must be tilled no sooner than the spring of the following year with the exception of fall strip tillage, which must still meet the minimum 50% cover as verified in the following spring.
- The following program details have also been altered: where the cover crop does not meet 50% cover during the spring assessment, and no tillage or grazing has occurred, seed costs will be reimbursed to a max of \$10/acre on approved acres.
- Incentive payments are limited to a maximum of \$1,500 per Farm Business Registration for the life of the program.

FINANCIAL/LEGAL IMPLICATIONS:

No additional financial contributions from Haldimand County will be required in order to implement the new Rural Water Quality Program additions. Haldimand County Council has approved participation in the program for a five year period including annual contributions of \$25,000 to this program. This 5 year commitment commenced in 2017 and is to run to 2022. However, due to excess funding it was determined that no financial contribution would be made in 2020. A similar request will be made for 2021. This program was not offered for most of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic caused a temporary hiatus of economic development staff and Conservation Authority's staff who administer the Program. Regular annual payments will resume in 2022 and 2023 to complete the five year contribution. As of January 1, 2021, the program has funds totalling \$34,700 for applicants to access.

STAKEHOLDER IMPACTS:

Haldimand County's Agriculture Advisory Committee worked closely with Haldimand County staff and Conservation Authority staff (from the Grand River Conservation Authority, Long Point Region Conservation Authority and Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority) to develop the proposed Rural Water Quality Program additions and updates. This committee's objective is to advise Council on

matters, issues and policies pertaining to agriculture and agri-business in Haldimand County, in order to sustain the vitality of the municipality's economic base.

This program also has a positive impact on rural land owners across Haldimand County as the grant encourages these individuals to implement agricultural management projects that protect and improve water quality. This is the only programming that is consistent across all three of Haldimand County's Conservation Authorities that aims to improve Rural Water Quality.

REPORT IMPACTS:

Agreement: No

By-law: No

Budget Amendment: No

Policy: No

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Haldimand County Rural Water Quality Program – Proposed Program Additions & Updated.