The transformation of Washington Creek

The Oxford County creek is seeing the benefits from buffer research

O ntario farmers’ knowledge of agroforestry techniques, including creek-side buffers, windbreaks, and “alley cropping” (alternating crops and rows of trees) has scarcely grown in the past 20 years, according to a survey conducted by the private contracting firm Forest Environments Universal Inc. (FEU).

The online survey contacted farmers through the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association’s e-mail list. So far about 50 have responded. Most farmers told the survey they have a “fair” or “limited” knowledge of agroforestry—a response almost unchanged from a 1998 survey. Respondents said OMAFRA remains an important contact for farmers. About a third of those surveyed listed the ministry as a key source of farming advice and new ideas.

By Ray Ford
The writer farms near Powasen at miteon.net

B ack in 1985, sections of Washington Creek wouldn’t have been your top choice for a scenic picnic spot. The Oxford County stream meandered through hard-working pasture and tilled fields. Its banks were collapsing. Its waters were muddy and filled with sediment. The “creek,” according to a team of scientists, was “an excellent example of a degraded agricultural stream.”

Now, more than 30 years later, parts of the once-dowdy Washington Creek have had a makeover. Researchers say trees, grass and shrubs have developed into a long-term experiment probing the impact of riparian buffers.

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Naresh Thevathasan says it has been your top choice for a scenic picnic spot.

Thevathasan argues some of those surveyed already have their hand full looking after their existing crops. Area farmer Bryan Tew crops corn and soybeans alongside the Washington Creek system.

Not surprisingly, his focus is on the field, and the buffer is mostly a backdrop. He’s concerned the zone could be a place where invasive weeds can gain a foothold. The short-lived hybrid poplars planted in the ‘80s can be a headache, too, because they die and topple into the creek or nearby field. “The odd one falls onto the field and I have to pull it away,” he said in a telephone interview.

Thevathasan argues some of these problems can be fixed by working with landowners during the planning stage. There’s no “cookie-cutter” design, he said. “We want the landowner to have ownership of what he is trying to design for his land.”

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