

Carrot River Producers Access Experts to Diversify

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For Sask Watershed Authority

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A group in east central Saskatchewan is exploring sustainable ways to diversify that are good for the land and add another one or two revenue streams from the same land parcel. Called Parkland Agro-forestry Inc., the group was formed five years ago and currently has about 30 members in an area enclosed by Nipawin, Naicam, Tisdale and Prince Albert.

Parkland Agro's members find and share market opportunities and assist each other in learning about sustainable forest management, short rotation, woody crops and agro-forestry practices. They also work with government departments and agencies to access programs, share information, and provide a land base for research. One of these programs is "The Carrot River Project," a partnership of federal and provincial departments, agencies and non-profit organizations involved in agriculture and the environment. The project's goal is to develop tools to encourage annual crop producers to adopt beneficial management practices when farming lands adjacent to watercourses.

Working with the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, and the Saskatchewan Forest Centre in Prince Albert, Parkland Agro assessed the need for training development in the ag-forestry sector. They formed a co-operative grower group to produce and market hybrid poplar hardwood cuttings and are now moving into the area of silva-culture – the management of tree stands with agriculture. This usually involves pasturing livestock in an area containing tree stands while establishing a forage base within the stand. Under good management the result is three marketable end products – forage, livestock and trees from the same piece of land. A fourth product can be added to this list if some of the products are berry trees which provide an annual harvest. It's efficient, a good revenue mix, and sustainable because it's also good for the land. Trees and forage areas can be established to take the best advantage of ground water, runoff and prevailing winds to stabilize and regenerate the soil. Once established, these areas can provide shelter, shade and food for livestock. They can also help cut the wind and control runoff to assist adjacent cropped areas.

Marg and Bill Sullivan are Parkland Agro members. They have a cow calf operation running 48 head of black Angus on a half section south of Melfort.

"We rotate the cows on four paddocks and have several water sources. We're pretty efficient," said Marg Sullivan. Since they can't afford to reduce their herd to allow a tree plantation, they feel the silva-culture route is their best option because it works with the cows.

In 2,000, the Sullivans established a one acre stooling bed and began growing and marketing hybrid poplar cuttings they obtained through Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's PFRA Shelterbelt at Indian Head. These cottonwood-poplar hybrids are hardy and well suited to the local environment. They grow straight and fast, and can reach 35 feet and maturity in 15 years. It was this interest and the need to develop markets that brought the Sullivans into Parkland Agro. Since Parkland Agro is developing products and markets for non-traditional hardwoods, like poplar, the Sullivans saw an opportunity to diversify even more.

"In the world of micro-management you have to make everything work efficiently," said Sullivan. "So, we took down an old stand of trees and are now working to redevelop a replacement stand. We'll use our own cuttings to do that and we want to be able to get some from the PFRA and the university so that we all work together."

"You start from an assessment of what you have and then design and implement a management plan," said Sullivan. "But it's a new thing for this area. Most information available is based on experiences elsewhere." As a result, the Sullivans have developed their management plan based on a template developed by one of Parkland's members. The template helps interested producers to identify the types of trees on their land, assess marketable volumes and determine reclamation steps necessary. Sullivan says the template was

needed because contracting to harvest timber on multi-use lands needs a different model than for large tracts of forest.

“Traditionally, these companies will come in and clear cut the stand. It’s a practice that works well on large, dedicated forestry areas, but it leaves farmland unusable because it has to be cleared and worked.”

Marg Sullivan sees market opportunities for private growers and value added wood product industries. And she extols the benefits of having trees on the land to pull water up from deeper resources, and provide erosion control. “Our soil is so sandy, you would look at it and wonder how we could grow trees there. But these hybrid poplars just take root, even through the drought,” she said. She’s positive about the economic benefits too, especially when producers adopt good management practices that make use of available assistance through initiatives like the Carrot River project. While funding for a variety of initiatives is available, the Sullivans are proceeding on their own with some aspects of their plans because the timelines for approvals and delivery don’t always jive with their development schedule. She insists, however, that partnering with these agencies can be mutually beneficial.

Speaking for Parkland’s members, Sullivan says: “The Sask Forest Centre has been a wonderful resource. We’ve had quite a bit of assistance from them and others who have participated with us in a lot of areas. They have professionals and information; we have the land. They need locations and people willing to commit a land base and we have members who are willing to try things without waiting for funding. So we marry up together and we get stuff done.”