

Environmental Farming Working for Brooksby Producer

By Brian Bowman

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The Moskals farm around 5,000 acres just west of Brooksby. Though primarily grain producers, for the past seven years they have also been raising elk on 130 acres of pasture supported by 200 acres of alfalfa which they use as forage.

“We were up as high as 230 head of elk but we’re down to about 35 now, due to prices, and we’re getting out of them,” said Stacey Moskal. “In future, we’re probably not going to have as much alfalfa there. Right now, we have the hay land in leaf cutter bees.

Stacey Moskal and his father Allan manage their operation in a way that demonstrates good environmental stewardship. Recently, Stacey became a director with the Saskatchewan Soil Conservation Association and he has just finished developing an Environmental Farm Plan workshop with facilitator Phil England, who used to work with Saskatchewan Agriculture Food and Rural Revitalization. Funded jointly by the federal and provincial governments, these workshops help producers to identify the strengths and risks on their operations and develop an action plan to address areas of concern to them.

The Moskals also work with the Carrot River Watershed Riparian Project, a partnership of federal and provincial departments, agencies and non-profit organizations involved in agriculture and the environment. Funding for the Carrot River Stewardship Project is provided by the GreenCover Canada Program Technical Assistance Component which is part of the Agricultural Policy Framework. Coordinated by the Conservation Learning Centre, the Carrot River project’s goal is to encourage annual crop producers to adopt beneficial management practices when farming lands adjacent to watercourses or other waterbodies.

The Moskals grow their alfalfa forage along the Carrot River. They have plans to crop it when they get completely out of their elk operation, but, for environmental reasons, they won’t farm it to the river’s edge.

“After we get out of the elk, we’ll put in a rotational crop - the same as we grow elsewhere on the farm,” said Stacey. “We have lots of trees along the river and in certain spots it’s just left to grass. I think we’d be okay anywhere along the river there because there’s a good buffer zone,” he added.

While the Moskals are maintaining a natural buffer along the river, trees and forage can be established in areas without them, including non-riparian yet sensitive areas like light or sandy land, 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.

Managing tree stands with agriculture provides revenue from what would otherwise be unproductive land. Hybrid poplars are available from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada’s PFRA Shelterbelt Centre at Indian Head or from private growers for that purpose. These trees establish quickly. They are self-pruning, grow straight and fast to 35 feet and can reach maturity in 15 to 20 years. There’s real money in them too. Producer groups in the region, like Parkland Agroforestry Inc., have commercial operators among their members who are establishing markets and developing value-added products from them. The tree rows can be established over a period of years so they’ll mature at different rates to provide continuous harvesting and a sustainable income. They can also be spaced to allow haying equipment clear passage for harvesting forage crops planted among the rows. Some producers are also establishing fruit bearing trees like chokecherries or saskatoons in these areas, as well, for an additional source of revenue.

Because the Moskal’s land base is fairly large, the soils range from black loam to clay till and blow sand. To manage it effectively, the Moskals, like most other producers in the region, are zero till farmers.

“We’ve really seen the benefits of zero till on sandy land. We have some blow sand and since we started zero till we’ve had some phenomenal yields compared to what we used to get. Using zero till has brought a lot of our land closer together in yield. We’re able to get the yields even on our marginal land. We’ve got

some black land with very nice loam and farm some land with more clay in it. When it rains, we just move up to the sand and we're able to keep going. We can go right after the rain, as long as we can get there," said Stacey.

The Moskals have been zero tilling for about 10 years.

"We are finding we're using a lot less fertilizer and chemical. The inputs got higher for a while and then they dropped off after four or five years of zero till. Now we're really seeing the benefits by not having to use as much chemical, especially wild oat chemical. We're cutting back on nitrogen fertilizer and at the same time maintaining our yields. That tells you something – there's a lot more mineralization going on. We have nothing but good things to say about zero till," he said.

If you are interested in learning more about the Carrot River Project, please contact Mitchell Japp at 953-2796.