

Those trees on your fenceline could be a money-maker

By Brian Bowman

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A producer at Zenon Park is participating in the “The Carrot River Watershed Riparian Project,” which encourages annual crop producers to adopt beneficial management practices when farming lands adjacent to watercourses or other waterbodies.

The Carrot River Watershed Riparian Project, coordinated by the Conservation Learning Centre, is a partnership of federal and provincial departments, agencies and non-profit organizations involved in agriculture and environment projects, funded through the GreenCover Canada Program Technical Assistance Component which is part of the Agricultural Policy Framework.

Francis Chabot is a grain producer rotating wheat, canola, barley, canary seed and alfalfa seed on 1200 acres along the edge of the Carrot River valley. He’s on the board of the Saskatchewan Conservation Development Association, and his work with the Watershed Riparian Project involves recruiting producers willing to establish test plots on areas of their land.

“I’ve talked to a couple of people about the projects that have river land with tree lines that come way out and then back in. I’ve been explaining to them that these are expensive areas to farm and there may be an opportunity to do something different than actually grow a crop in there.”

Rivers don’t run straight, as a rule, and their meanders extend to the valleys and trees that border them. This often means that fields along rivers and larger streams feature doglegs and switchbacks that are small and difficult to access. Farming them is tough on time and equipment to the point where it may not be profitable. Since these areas are generally sloped to some degree, they carry a lot of runoff. Cultivating them reduces or eliminates the riparian zone, which acts as a natural filter and buffer. Working them exposes the watercourse to erosion and seriously threatens water quality. Producers know that, but few can afford the loss of arable land. Chabot says there are some profitable alternatives.

“One of the things I’m looking at that seems logical to me, would be filling those areas in with trees,” he said.

This practice can straighten the field, reduce runoff and also provide a sustainable income. It involves establishing rows of trees, often with a forage base within the stand. Under good management the result adds at least two marketable products – forage and trees, from the same piece of land. A third product can be added to this mix if some of these 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. They can also help cut the wind and control runoff to assist adjacent cropped areas.

Since Chabot and other producers in his area are farming land that was originally cleared from forest, old growth trees are common along the borders of fields. They restrict access, and are often used to assist spraying operations by acting as a buffer against spray drift.

“Out here there are some tree lines, fence lines with trees growing in them,” said Chabot, adding that in some areas these tree lines have broadened up to 40 feet wide. “The trees are getting old and they’re falling over, so when you seed or harvest they’re in your way. We actually use them as a chemical break, sometimes, because if you’ve got a different crop in the next field separated by a good tree line, you can still spray.”

But the practice is destroying the vegetation in those tree lines. Trees are not the only remedy for problems of erosion, but they may offer the best control measure in some instances.

If you are interested in learning more about the project, contact: Mitchell Japp at 953-2796.