

 News

Education key to halt eastern deforestation

Farmer says competition and market forces are mostly to blame for owners opting for the chainsaw

BY TOM VAN DUSEN
Ontario Farmer

Kemptville – St. Isidore grain farmer Marc Bercier laid the cards on the table at the 2015 Christmas Forest Seminar held in Kemptville Dec. 16.

Yes, Bercier allowed, Eastern Ontario farmers have played a large role in the steady deforestation of the region over the past decade.

In a way, he explained to about 110 forest cover enthusiasts attending the seminar, farmers were pushed into it by competition and market forces.

Farmers are expected to feed the world, said the well-known agricultural entrepreneur. To do that, they need to get bigger and that can mean clear-cutting bush to make way for crops.

He acknowledged that a major incentive came three years ago when the price of corn hit \$300 a tonne and soybeans were more than double that amount. It would have been better for regional forests had prices remained lower.

He agreed that farmers could be instrumental in replacing some of the lost forest, noting that he personally has “rediscovered” the merit of trees and believes other farmers will follow suit. Trees, he said, are invaluable in separating fields and in preventing soil erosion.

They also provide habitat, shade, shelter and convert car-

bon dioxide into oxygen. They can even be entertaining, said South Nation Conservation (SNC) forest resources manager Josee Brizard, showing the audience a tree profile that looked like John F. Kennedy.

Education and compensation programs are two useful tools in limiting clear cutting and restoring lost forest, Bercier underlined.

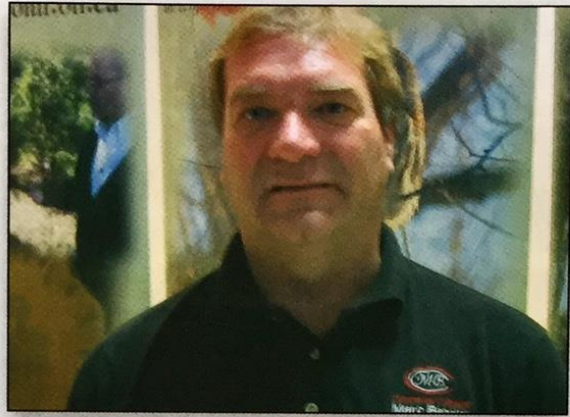
For anyone unsure about the extent of the declining forest, figures were released during the seminar as part of a study showing a marked reduction throughout the region since a previous report conducted in 2008.

SNC and partners decided to update the study because anecdotal evidence indicated forest cover had decreased considerably. New data gathered in part through satellite-generated photography backed the common perception.

Five key reasons were given for the loss of forest: Industrial expansion, residential expansion, agricultural expansion, solar farm installation, and no specific reason. Sometimes, the meeting was told, forest is removed with no obvious objective.

By far the main reason for clear-cutting is agricultural expansion, accounting for about 75 per cent of the loss across the surveyed region which includes part of Ottawa and the counties of Stormont, Dundas, Glengarry, Prescott, Russell, and a portion of Leeds and Grenville.

While some parts of the region are holding their own in terms of forest cover, others such as North Dundas and Rus-



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sell Township are down to 14 per cent and less than 13 per cent respectively.

Since 2008, the decline has been steady, ranging from a few percentage points in some municipalities to several point in others. Some municipal councils are considering tree-cutting restrictions; in Champlain Township, Mayor Gary Barton will see “what kind of consideration” can be enacted to alleviate the clear-cutting concerns of residents such as Andy Perreault who recently staged a one-man ‘Save the Forest’ protest.

On the other side of the ledger, public and private tree planting has been compensating forest loss to some degree, including in the SNC jurisdiction which supports woodlot advisory services and a program setting aside \$250,000 a year for land acquisition.

Bercier is a third generation farmer working more than 2,000 acres; he also owns a seed business employing 20 people and prides himself in a farm

vision and mission promoting sustainability, transparency, respect, integrity and a lifestyle improved by agriculture. He’s also proud that his father began replanting along watercourses decades ago.

“We’re striving for excellence in every aspect of production,” he told the seminar, adding he recently converted a gully into a constructed wetland rather than run tile drain through it. “We’re responsible for future generations.”

Jim McCready, long-time chairman of the Eastern Ontario Model Forest group which co-sponsored the Christmas seminar, said kid gloves are more useful than a big stick when it comes to replenishing the regional forest cover.

Farmers such as Bercier are certainly on the right track and education is needed to persuade greater numbers to cherish the forests, McCready concluded, adding a balance must be achieved between sufficient cover and development.

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