

While widespread clearcutting has many Eastern Ontario residents and legislators on edge – see editorial on this page – the situation isn't hopeless.

Whatever the reasons, valid or not, there's no doubt clearcutting is a blight on the countryside. Almost every road you drive along these days will feature large tracts of scalped terrain, piles of brush ready to be burned, and heavy equipment poised to take down more trees.

While some of the desecration is for residential development, most is for agricultural expansion.

Nobody on either side of the argument discounts the value of trees in preventing soil erosion, protecting groundwater, providing windbreaks, and sustaining wildlife habitat... but money talks!

It's a complex dilemma because both sides are right, the farmers who want to make hay while the sun shines by extending cash cropping opportunities, and the so-called tree huggers because they prefer to do God's good work in preserving the forests.

While these two goals are often at odds, there are a few small signs of a rapprochement between the factions.

During the annual Forest Seminar held in Kemptville before Christmas, guest speaker St. Isidore grain farmer Marc Bercier allowed that Eastern Ontario farmers have played a large role in the steady deforestation of the region over the past decade.

In a way, Bercier maintained, farmers were pushed into clear cutting 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 removing bush to make way for cash crops.

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.

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.

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.

South Nation Conservation and partners decid-

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.

That's something that grates particularly on SNC General Manager Dennis O'Grady. While he can grudgingly accept removal of trees for something productive such as creating new grain fields to help feed the world, it bothers him to no end to see forests raze and the land left idle.

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 Russell 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 points in others. 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 program setting aside \$250,000 a year for land acquisition.

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

He agrees with O'Grady that education and forest management assistance are good tools in helping to convince farmers that their trees might be more valuable than they suspect. If you want to take your own forest permanently out of the line of fire, you might consider donating it to SNC for preservation in perpetuity.

As it turns out, SNC's Jim Hendry will be speaking about that very topic during the 29th annual Winter Woodlot Conference, also sponsored by the Model

