Ecology South

August 2012

**Ottawa Co. tour shows sustainable farm tactics**

**Great Lakes restoration grants fund efforts**

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OAK HARBOR, Ohio -- On Jerry Whipple's farm in Ottawa County, innovative conservation techniques meld with an old-time farm feel, a combination that agricultural

and environmental experts say is key to the restoration and health of Lake Erie.

On Wednesday, the third-generation farmer shared his practices publicly during a farm tour -- which include no-till farming, the installation of drainways and filter

strips, and the use of soil and pH mapping machinery -- as part of an event held by the Ohio Environmental Council and the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes

Coalition to show the results of restoration efforts.

"My grandfather and father were very passionate about taking care of the soil. They don't make it anymore, they told me," Mr. Whipple said. "I'm very happy you can

see what we have accomplished ... [from] an American farmer who feeds some 180 people every day," he told about 20 people assembled at his 400-acre farm.

Mr. Whipple's conservation efforts are being funded in part by the federal Great Lakes Initiative program, which provides him $35 per

acre to implement testing and plant cover crops, which control weeds and secure soil in place.

His efforts are part of a much larger statewide push to eliminate -- or at least lessen -- toxic algae blooms that have plagued Lake Erie

for much of the last decade fueled by excessive runoff from the landscape.

Some of the practices Mr. Whipple said he has been implementing for decades include filter strips that channel water runoff away from

rivers and streams that flow into the lake. Other practices are much newer, such as the use of a Veris mobile sensor platform machine

that is pulled back and forth across the fields to collect data samples so that the farmer can pinpoint which areas of the field need more

nutrients.

The ability to customize the placing and type of nutrients at different levels on the field prevents over fertilization, which sparks soil runoff

from areas inundated with unnecessary chemicals, said Todd Hecht of Helena Chemical Company in Martin, Ohio, the agribusiness that

supplies the mapping machinery and the testing.

"We are trying to keep the nutrients in the crop and not the soil," where it can run off, he said.

The practice also results in better yields for the farmer by producing more crops from the areas of the field that were previously lacking in nutrients, he said.

Mr. Whipple, who plants wheat, rye, corn, food-grade soybeans, and alfalfa, said the environmental methods allow him to use fewer chemicals in his fields.



"[His farming] practices are keeping nutrient-laden soil in place on the farm, where it belongs," said Kristy Meyer, director of Agricultural

and Clean Water programs for the OEC. "It's a success story on keeping our fields green and growing and Lake Erie blue and healthy."

The Great Lakes Initiative is also funding the renovation of pipes and a drainbox wall in an east-west running drainway that runs through

an 80-acre plot of property where Mr. Whipple farms.

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative program, which was first funded by President Obama with $475 million in fiscal year 2010, has

seen a drop in funding in subsequent years -- last year federal funding for the restoration project was approved at $300 million, and a

drop to $250 million for the next fiscal year is pending a vote on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives.

The initiative is paying for a number of other projects in the state -- in 2010 and 2011, Ohio received more than $48.8 million that funded

about 55 projects statewide, Ms. Meyer said.

One such project is the installation this fall of bio reactors on pipes on a farm field in Ottawa and on land at Lucas County's Blue Creek

Conservation area in Waterville Township, said Mike Libben, district program manager for the Ottawa Soil & Water Conservation District.

The project, in conjunction with agricultural experts at Ohio State University, uses a pipe that drains runoff through wood chips to draw harmful nitrogen out of the

water. Mr. Libben said they are hoping to get funding to install a similar reactor that pulls phosphorous from the water as well later this year.

Wednesday's farm tour was followed by a tour of Lake Erie, in which Jeff Reutter, executive director of the Ohio Sea Grant program at

the OSU Stone Lab on Gibraltar Island, gave attendees a tour of the lake and talked about cleanup efforts there.

Officials say the algae this year will be milder this summer -- about 10 percent of the thick, green slime that covered much of the western

basin last year -- boosting both the lake's health and the region's $10 billion tourism economy.

The tours were attended by state Rep. Randy Gardner (D., Bowling Green), who this year secured $3 million in state funding to aid in

farmland testing and other restoration efforts through his Healthy Lake Erie Fund bill, as well as representatives from the offices of U.S.

Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D., Toledo), U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown (D., Ohio), and Sen. Rob Portman (R., Ohio).

Representatives on both sides of the political fence are fighting for funding to create better barriers to stop the advancement of the

destructive Asian carp to the Great Lakes, which threaten to wipe out the region's $7 billion fishing industry, monitor open-lake dumping

of dredged sediment from Toledo Harbor and other shipping channels, and keep the money flowing that funds restoration efforts like that

of Mr. Whipple.

"This is one of the few issues these days where there is not this great divisiveness [in Congress]," said Jordan Lubetkin, a spokesman

for Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, a consortium made up of more than 120 environmental, conservation, recreational, and

cultural groups established in 2006 to lobby Congress to fund lake restoration.

For more information on the grant programs funded by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, go to **epa.gov/glnpo/glri/**.

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