

## William McNeil

### Finalist for 2009 Farm Environmental Stewardship Award



Driving past William McNeil's Saulsbrook Farm in Windsor Forks, Hants County, you'll usually notice numerous black-faced Suffolk sheep and Standardbred horses roaming the large pastures that slope downhill from the farmhouse to roadside. What isn't as obvious is the hard work and commitment to the environment the seventh-generation farmer and his family have put into the farm.



These efforts have earned McNeil a spot in the top five finalists for the first annual Farm Environmental Stewardship Award. This award was established to highlight producers who make good land, water and habitat stewardship a significant part of their farm operations. Eligible farmers are participants in the Nova Scotia Environmental Farm Plan, a voluntary program that helps farmers identify, assess, and reduce environmental risk on their farms. Since the program's inception in 1999, more than 1270 farmers have become involved and developed Environmental Farm Plans for their operations.

"Our family has owned and worked this land since 1869," says McNeil, whose farm was one of six original land grants established in the Windsor area. "Thinking environmentally is a family commitment." His son Allan focuses on breeding and training the racehorses, while McNeil's passion is for raising purebred sheep.

To improve his herd genetics, McNeil has imported semen from Great Britain for his sheep breeding program, which includes breeding for resistance to scrapie disease. The animals are raised on hay and pasture, rather than expensive grains, and yield a high quality product for the Canadian lamb market.

Much of McNeil's land is dykeland reclaimed from the tidal waters of the upper Bay of Fundy. The land is crowned and ditched for optimal field drainage and minimal runoff, with tile drainage in the upland areas. Livestock have automatic waterers provided in their pastures, and fencing keeps the animals out of the farm's brooks and ponds.

McNeil says a Nutrient Management Plan is a key part of being a successful environmental steward. "It's important to handle storage and application of manure so that it provides maximum benefit to the land and minimizes the chance for runoff into waterways." By ensuring the soil pH of his fields are in the ideal range he makes certain that nutrients applied to fields will be available for plants to use. McNeil uses no pesticides on his farm.

Wildlife conservation has long been of interest to McNeil and his family. To minimize destruction of bird nests in croplands, McNeil chooses to use late-maturing forage crops such as Farol timothy, which isn't harvested until young birds have matured enough to be able to fly. The farm has several wetland areas sponsored by Ducks Unlimited, including ponds that teem with waterfowl and other birds.

William McNeil encourages other farmers to become involved with good environmental stewardship. Although it can require financial investment to change how a farmer operates, McNeil says, "You have to spend money in order to make money," adding that most of the environment-improving considerations he's made have also had a positive financial effect on the farm.

"Protecting and respecting the environment should be a priority for all farmers," says McNeil. "It's in our best interests to ensure that we leave the land we work in as good shape or better as it was when we began farming it. Future generations depend on our good land practices." He adds that he's fond of an old saying, "Pass on a farm in better condition than when you took it over." He says simply, "This is our objective."

The Farm Environmental Stewardship Award is a part of the Environmental Farm Plan Program. It was created through a partnership of the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, the NS Environmental Farm Plan Team and the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture. The Environmental Farm Plan Program is an initiative under the Canada-Nova Scotia Growing Forward Agreement.