

## **Andrew VanOostrum**

### **Finalist for 2009 Farm Environmental Stewardship Award**



Andrew VanOostrum has fond memories of childhood summer days spent fishing for trout in a brook that crosses his farm in Grafton, near Berwick in the Annapolis Valley. Such memories have galvanized his efforts to be an effective and committed environmental steward. “I wanted to make changes in the way we operate our farm so that my children can enjoy the brook and ponds and the wildlife on our property as they grow up,” he says. The second-generation producer raises beef cattle and grows soybeans, wheat, corn and forage crops on his acreage, which curves down the base of the North Mountain and borders on the headwaters of the Cornwallis River.



VanOostrum is one of five finalists in 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.

VanOostrum was one of the first farmers in Nova Scotia to have an Agricultural Biodiversity Conservation Plan done for his farm. He has implemented a number of the plan recommendations on his operation, with particular focus on improving the health of waterways that cross his property. He’s also gone beyond those recommendations, constantly striving to improve his management practices.

Some of Nova Scotia’s most fertile and productive soil is found in the Annapolis Valley, and VanOostrum works hard to protect his fields from damage and soil loss caused by erosion, compaction and runoff. He practices minimum tillage and no-till cultivation of his fields, only putting ploughs on the land when absolutely necessary, and rotating forage, corn and grain crops to help maintain soil health. Over the past five years he has significantly reduced his use of expensive commercial fertilizers by implementing a Nutrient Management Plan and using livestock manure as his primary source of improving soil fertility. He uses GPS technology to help manage pesticide use, which has reduced overspray on his grain crops.

Raising livestock on pasture means providing them with a reliable source of water, and VanOostrum has been innovative in his management practices. He’s built engineered

livestock crossings (culverts and bridges) and done extensive fencing to keep his cattle out of the waterways. Several ponds on the property provide water to the livestock, using wind- and solar-powered watering systems. Currently VanOostrum is installing a winter-safe solar watering system, which he says is generating a lot of interest in the farm community.

VanOostrum is a member of Ducks Unlimited and has been a director of the Cornwallis Headwaters Society, a proactive organization dedicated to the health of the river's watershed and surrounding communities, since its establishment. He regularly welcomes on-farm tours and research projects by environmental, wildlife and farm groups, and takes the long view when considering how to best be a steward of his land.

Always looking for ways to improve his farm management and the property's environmental health, VanOostrum continues to reestablish natural habitats on his farm. He's working on even better manure handling and storage as well as continuing his dedication to local waterway protection.

Would he like to have done anything differently to this point in his farm's environmental rehabilitation? VanOostrum says in an ideal world he would have implemented some of his habitat and farm practice improvements sooner than he has been able to do. However, a challenging market for farmers in general and beef producers in particular means that he has to make changes slowly but steadily.

Despite those challenges, he's keen to see more farmers participate in the Environmental Farm Plan, but is quick to remind farmers that they need to be patient when committing themselves to being good environmental stewards.

"Improving our farm management and the health of the natural environment isn't an overnight job," he says. "But the benefits are long-term, too."

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.