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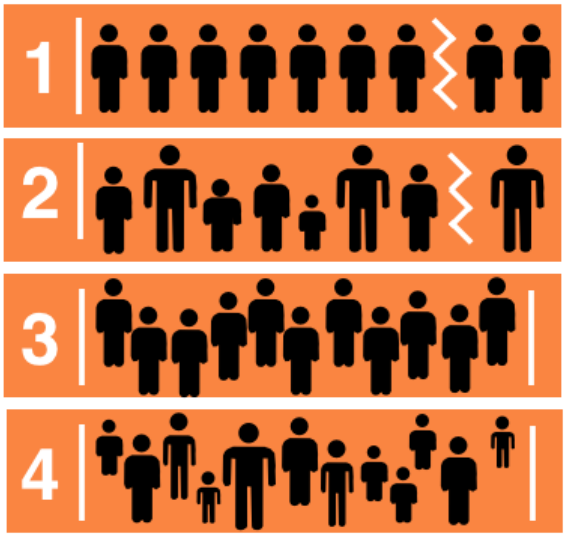
Alternative Funding Models for Agricultural Stewardship Programs in Ontario

Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

November 2014



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Executive Summary

Ontario's rich soils support a strong agricultural community, the landscape of which is home to numerous plant and animal species. Management decisions by those responsible for these landscapes directly impact the environment and the quality of water, soil, air and biodiversity on which we all depend.

In Ontario, agricultural stewardship efforts are supported by various government initiatives, as well as not-for-profit agencies. For many years, the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA), a leading agency in the delivery of stewardship programing to Ontario's farmers, followed a very streamlined and predictable process of program delivery to provide cost-share support to applicants. This first-come, first-served approach enabled quick responses to participants and was the program design choice for the past two decades.

Declining budgets in recent years and a policy landscape that is increasingly focused on performance measurement has meant a shift in how OSCIA develops and delivers stewardship programs. The organization has responded to these changes by building new delivery models based on merit, allowing funders to support the highest quality projects that demonstrate the greatest measured benefit toward the desired outcome.

Currently, there are four broad stewardship program structures OSCIA applies and offers:

- Prescribed- Conventional first-come, first-served
- Partitioned- Merit-based first-come, first-served
- Equitable- Merit-based with intake periods
- Self-Governed- Conservation tender

Fundamentally altering long-standing practices in the farm community is not an easy or quick process, and each model has advantages and disadvantages. Efforts are underway to streamline and further improve each delivery model as programs evolve and feedback from program participants and delivery staff is processed and incorporated.

Introduction

Farmland in Ontario is home not only to crops and livestock, but also a diverse array of wildlife. The actions of farmers, including decisions made on how they grow crops and raise livestock, can impact the environment and the quality of water, soil, air and biodiversity on which we depend.

In a recent survey, 96 percent of respondents in Ontario stated that the environmental health of their land is important to them (SAR survey of Farm Businesses, OSCIA 2014). Currently in the province of Ontario, many on-farm stewardship efforts are supported by various government initiatives, as well as not-for-profit agencies that provide education and funding assistance to encourage the adoption of Best Management Practices (BMPs).

The development and methodology as to how these stewardship models are structured and funds allocated to applicants is the subject of this white paper, which examines the characteristics, challenges, and benefits of several innovative approaches currently used by the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA), a leading agency in the delivery of stewardship programing to Ontario's farmers.

About the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA)

OSCIA is a grassroots farm organization with a head office located in Guelph, Ontario and 50 county/district clubs across the province. A Board of Directors comprised of Ontario farmers elected by the organization's members governs the association. OSCIA was formed in 1939 to help connect industry, agricultural researchers, and farmers at a time when the agricultural sphere was undergoing notable changes. The association has adapted over its lifetime, adjusting to the evolving agricultural sector in Ontario. Currently, OSCIA delivers education and incentive programs for various federal departments, provincial ministries, and foundations across the province.

OSCIA has been a delivery agent for farm-based stewardship programs for many years, including administering the long-standing and well-known Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) since its inception in the early 1990s. The EFP program has been extremely successful, with more than 70 percent of Ontario farmers voluntarily participating. Each participant is encouraged to develop an Action Plan for their farm business, identifying areas of environmental concern and possible solutions. A completed EFP verified through third-party review is often the primary eligibility criteria to access cost-share dollars.

Stewardship Program Delivery: An Overview

For many years, OSCIA's program delivery activities followed a very streamlined and predictable process, offering cost-share to interested applicants throughout a program's lifecycle (figure 1). The most popular and perhaps well-known program delivered by OSCIA was the Canada Ontario Farm Stewardship Program (COFSP). The program was introduced in 2005 across Ontario. After completion of a free EFP educational workshop, attendants could access cost-share funding to implement on-farm stewardship projects linked to their EFP Action Plan.

Under the more recent COFSP framework, similar programs offered by different funding agents and delivered through OSCIA were designed as "top-up" programs, utilizing a single application form for all available funding opportunities delivered by OSCIA. Without any additional effort on the part of producers, participants could access several programs for the same project and receive up to 100 percent cost-share. Additional program dollars were put toward further support for existing projects, rather then incentives for new projects to be completed.

Since 2012, declining budgets, increasing demand in cost-share programs, and a shift in government emphasis towards measurement of the impact of incentive programs, meant that the conventional 'first-come, first-served' model was no longer preferred.

In response, OSCIA has focused on optimization; developing new models through which to deliver incentive programs that focus on the unique merit associated with each application. Optimization adds complexity to the application and review process, but also provides targeting, measure and strength to the original first-come, first-served approach. This allows funders and delivery agents to support the highest quality projects that demonstrate the greatest environmental benefit for the topic at hand.

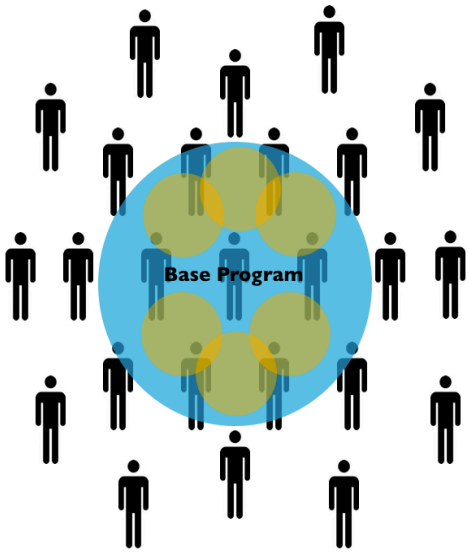


Figure 1: Previous approach to OSCIA Stewardship Program delivery (streamlined)

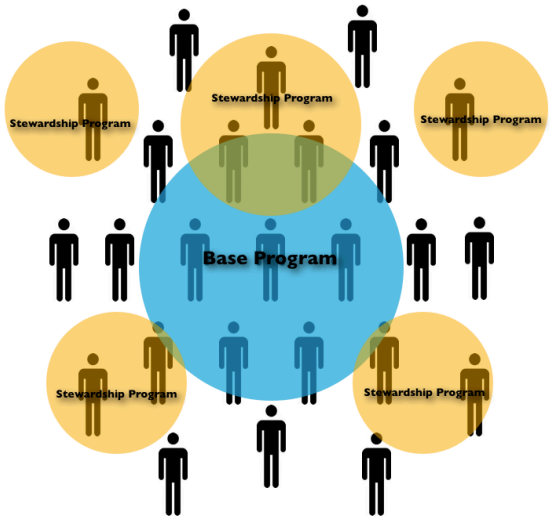


Figure 2: Recent approach to OSCIA program delivery (optimization)

Criteria for Alternative Funding Model Development

OSCIA has taken on the challenge of developing alternative funding model solutions to meet the changing requirements of our current policy landscape. A number of criteria were considered during the development process:

- A **merit-based** approach that allows for evaluation of project applications based on their **beneficial impact** for the targeted environmental issue
- An **objective, unbiased** evaluation process that is defendable, consistent, and identifies the best quality projects that provide the best value for public dollars invested
- A **streamlined approach** to decision-making that does not involve the added expense and bureaucracy and potential for bias associated with one or more review committees
- **Science-based decision making** that includes technical advice from subject matter experts

As a result of this evolving process, OSCIA's current program delivery approach is focused on optimizing the quality of projects selected for funding and their contributions towards the desired program outcomes. This allows the organization to support a broader number of projects in a more specialized way and target efforts toward projects that demonstrate the highest value.

A great deal of planning is required when building stewardship programs, including:

- Establishing the focus of the program
- Identifying favoured goals and outcomes
- Evaluating and selecting the most appropriate program design
- Developing a tool to identify merit
- Developing the application process in connection with merit
- Maintaining simple, responsive, and appropriate structure for the intended audience

OSCIA currently delivers programs that follow one of four funding approaches. Each funding model varies in complexity and process. No one approach offers an ideal means through which to deliver incentive programs on all environmental topics; each presents challenges and attributes that must be acknowledged.

A description and summary of experiences to date with all four approaches is provided in this document under the headings of:

1. Prescribed: Conventional first-come, first-served
2. Partitioned: Merit-based first-come, first-served
3. Equitable: Merit-based with intake periods
4. Self-Governed: Conservation tender

Figure 3: OSCIA Stewardship Program Delivery Models

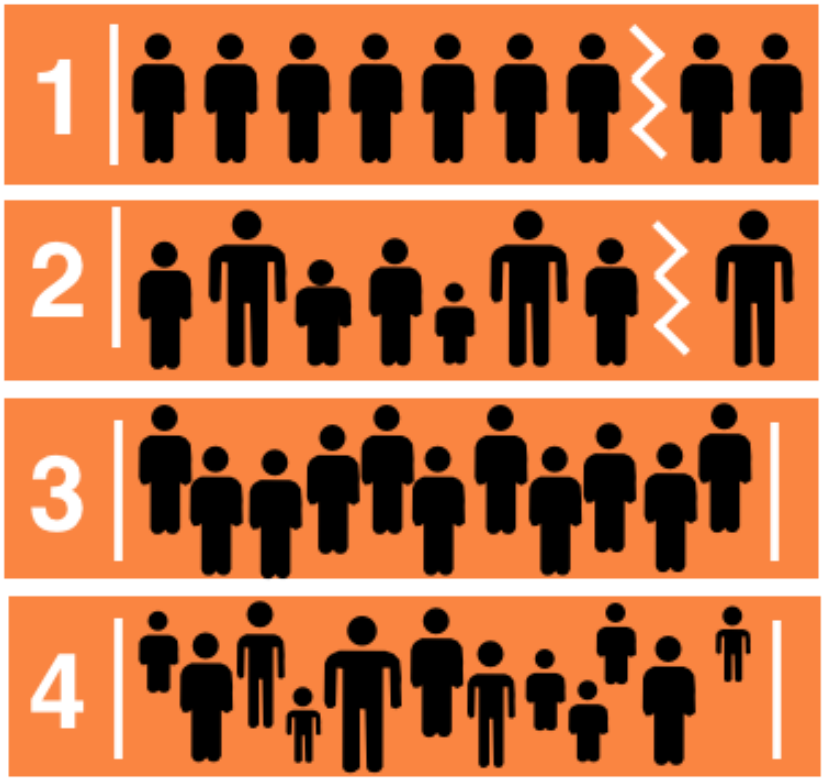
In model one, project applications are evaluated and approved (or rejected) in the order in which they are received. Under this model, all applicants are treated equally regardless of the type of project proposed or other site-specific factors. Applicants can typically access a standard amount of cost-share. Figure 3 displays this model visually.

Under the second model, first-come, first-served with a merit component, there are varying amounts of cost-share accessible for applicants. Proposed projects are evaluated with an Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) developed for each specific program. An EBI is developed in connection with the goals and desired outcomes of the program and applied to individual projects to determine which funding level applicants qualify for.

Model three illustrates the structure of a merit-based with specific program intake periods model. All applicants are treated equally in terms of the available cost-share levels and an EBI is used to evaluate projects and determine the most effective projects based on the information provided during the application stage.

Under the fourth model, conservation tender/competitive bid, cost-share or funding level caps are not pre-established for farm businesses. Applicants identify their own cost-share levels based on their perceived view of the funding they need to complete a project. The funding request information contributes to the evaluation process. The EBI is developed for each program and is rigorous and specialized. Cost-share amounts differ greatly among applicants, as do the EBI scores.

All approaches rely on set activities completed by the producer in association with a BMP.



Evaluation of Funding Models

1. Conventional First-come, First-served

1.1 Program Description and Intent

This approach is the conventional funding model that has long been used by OSCIA to deliver stewardship programing. It provides a reliable baseline with which to compare other frameworks. This delivery mechanism is grounded in a first-come, first-served structure where applications are evaluated and approved or rejected in the order in which they are submitted. Set cost-share per BMP ensures all eligible applicants are dealt with equitably. Targeting is derived from eligibility requirements and considerations can vary widely from broad or specific. Selection of actions and funding levels happens at the design phase, when identifying the appropriate audience for a given program. This approach works well when the intent is to broadly encourage the adoption of beneficial environmental BMPs, and to make the application process quick and easy for applicants.

The most widely known example of this type of incentive program is the COFSP associated with EFP between 2005-2013.

In 2014, a cost-share program to help the swine sector cope with Porcine Epidemic Diarrhea (PED) was launched shortly after the disease was first discovered in Ontario in January. The PED program relied on a first-come, first-served funding model to deliver cost-share swiftly and equitably to a specific group of applicants across the province. The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) chose to follow this conventional funding model as it was seen to be the quickest way to distribute funds to the largest number of producers in such pressing circumstances. Both the viral nature of the disease and its devastating economic consequences meant the government had to take swift action. In this case, it was also important that hog farmers across the province had an equal opportunity to receive funding based on submission of a project application.

1.2 Strengths

Overall, the conventional funding model is popular with farmers as it is straight forward, easy to interpret and familiar. Cost-share levels are equal for all applicants implementing like projects and it has a simple and streamlined application process and review procedure.

From a program delivery standpoint, administering a first-come, first-served program reduces overhead and administration costs and allows for funds to be distributed as requested, dependent on budget and interest. Development of this type of program is generally straightforward. Projects are accepted based on eligibility criteria alone and subject matter experts are not needed to review most applications.

1.3 Challenges

This model works well when the program budget and project demands from applicants are well matched. It is an ideal way to introduce the farming community to challenging

and innovative new practices; with appropriate incentive dollars available, the barriers to participation are low.

If practices supported through this type of program structure prove popular, it can become difficult to manage expectations within given budgets. When demand quickly outstrips the supply of incentive dollars, it is increasingly challenging to decline projects based solely on the order in which they were submitted. In extreme cases, significant annual budgets can be allocated within hours, making the approval process very arbitrary. This is an issue OSCIA has experienced first-hand which resulted in frustrations from many farmers across the province.

Another challenge with this model comes with trying to measure actual environmental impact. Targeting is limited to eligibility criteria as projects first in line are funded. Data regarding types of BMPs implemented can be gathered, but there is little additional information to form a true picture of what benefit practices offer on site. Performance measure is particularly important for government programs, with a growing need to justify the expenditure of public dollars and demonstrate measurable benefits for funds invested.

Conventional Model

Applicant standpoint	
Strengths:	**Weaknesses:**
✔ Predictable (funding amounts, approval process)	✗ May need to rush and submit application while cost-share funds still available
✔ Easy application process	✗ All producers and projects treated equally
✔ Equal cost-share amounts for all applicants	
Program delivery standpoint	
Strengths:	**Weaknesses:**
✔ Lower administration and overhead costs	✗ Limited ability to direct cost-share dollars to projects promising the greatest benefit
✔ No need to develop a merit evaluation tool to differentiate projects	✗ Limited performance measurement data
✔ Funding can be targeted to a select geographical area or farm sector, and can accommodate many or few BMP categories	✗Challenging to predict budget expenditures at conclusion of program
✔ Effective way to introduce innovative new practices	
✔ Straightforward and easy to establish	

2. Merit-based First-come, First-served

2.1 Program Description and Intent

This is a hybrid model that builds on the concept of first-come, first-served but adds an aspect of targeting. Varying levels of cost-share are built within a framework that allows funding to be focused on projects of highest environmental value, while maintaining support for those with a more modest impact. Proposed projects are provided cost-share approvals in the order in which they are received, until available funding is committed. Cost-share allocations are determined for approved projects based on the level of achievement proposed (measured by change in practice or through project results). This framework relies on the development of a streamlined tool to identify the level of environmental benefit associated with an individual project application.

Two program examples using this model were delivered in 2013 by OSCIA. They include: Farming Power, an opportunity focused on improving on-farm energy efficiency, and the Species at Risk Farm Incentive Program (SARFIP), which was targeted at species at risk habitat provision and development.

Programs following this model require applicants to provide additional data with their application. Applicants to the Farming Power program, for example, were asked to submit estimated power consumption levels before and after project implementation. SARFIP applicants had to identify if species at risk were found on their farm or in their area. This requires verification from outside experts, which places additional responsibility on the shoulders of applicants.

The objective of the Farming Power program was to improve energy efficiency and reduce reliance on fossil fuels on farms. The program provided cost-share funding towards projects to retrofit and upgrade lighting, heating, refrigeration and cooling systems in farm buildings. Projects demonstrating the greatest change in annual energy consumption (before and after) were awarded higher funding levels. An Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) was developed by OSCIA and used to predict energy expenditures annually. Applicants were required to secure the services of an independent energy professional to calculate estimated energy savings for each proposed upgrade.

SARFIP was designed to encourage BMPs that support habitat development or encourage protection of at-risk species by offering cost-share opportunities at three different levels depending on a project's link to species at risk.

Farm properties located in a designated species at risk priority area were eligible for a higher level of cost-share. In order to qualify for the highest level of funding, applicants had to provide a letter from a biologist or local Conservation Authority confirming the presence of a species at risk on the property in question. In addition, the proposed project had to align with a species recovery plan or government response statement.

2.2 Strengths

This approach maintains the ease of delivering a first-come, first-served program, but offers the ability to focus program dollars towards projects that provide the highest benefit for society. Applicants know exactly what to expect through the first-come, first-served model, and have the ability to select or at least fully predict what level of cost-share they'll be receiving. The targeting nature of this model is really its key strength. Depending on the goals of the project, this approach enables an incredibly straightforward, defendable and transparent means of targeting. Though broad opportunities are available to all applicants, they remain at a low level of funding, and those who fit the established criteria built to target the highest benefit projects receive far more substantial compensation for actions undertaken. Through this construct, the majority of program dollars are directed to targeted projects (be it landscape, change in practice, focus on a particular species etc.)

Through this model a knowledge transfer element can be easily woven into the fabric of the program. In both Farming Power and SARFIP, applicants seeking funding are encouraged to research the topic at hand and work with experts in the field to build projects with the highest benefit. In a follow up survey on the Farming Power program, 60 percent of respondents indicated that they felt the energy professional added value to their project by helping them understand the level of efficiency that could be gained and by recommending the appropriate technology. Demonstrated through a Species At Risk (SAR) Opinion Poll conducted by OSCIA, respondents identified an interest in learning more about SAR and gaining an improved understanding of actions they could take on their farms to protect these sensitive species. This framework is ideally suited to providing knowledge transfer and support for the added effort by means of increased funding opportunities.

Applicants have a more accurate and in depth level of understanding of the costs associated with their project through added program requirements. This leads to better prediction of fund utilization.

2.3 Challenges

The added complexities associated with this program structure require applicants to slow the application process down. The system is not as streamlined as a purely first-come, first-served approach. Additional effort is required to gather supplementary information prior to submitting an application. Although this is needed to determine a project's merit and establish an appropriate cost-share level, it is more collaboration than most farmers have been used to during previous programs. Both large-scale commercial farms as well as small-scale operations were equally able to overcome this hurtle.

In development of this type of program, designers must have a strong understanding of what is to be accomplished through the program and how results will be achieved. The

EBI must be defendable and accurate; suggesting consultation with experts in the field to assist in the development of metrics is key.

Partners involved in the knowledge transfer aspect of this program must be willing to get engaged and provide expertise.

Several of the limitations associated with the conventional first-come, first-served model persist with this approach. If the overall program budget does not appropriately match the interest in participation, annual dollars might still be allocated very quickly.

Projects that would not necessarily be targeted as ideal projects, yet fit within the program guidelines, will receive funding.

Merit-based First-come, First-served

Applicant standpoint	
Strengths:	**Weaknesses:**
✔ Potential to have greater understanding of project results	✗ Time required to gather supplemental information and complete paper work
✔ Provides incentive for those interested in both small and significant change (can customize to needs/interests)	✗ Potential difficulty finding specialists (e.g. energy specialists, biologists) when required
✔ Broadly available to farmers	
✔ Offers the ease and consistency of first-come, first-served	
Program delivery standpoint	
Strengths:	**Weaknesses:**
✔ Able to compare projects and evaluate performance measure with merit-based component	✗ Planning and development costs to establish levels and means of measurement of environmental benefits
✔ Direct greater level of funding towards targeted high-quality projects	✗ Potential challenge in communicating different funding levels (e.g. SARFIP had four funding levels depending on project variables)
✔ Encourages knowledge transfer through specialists, research, and information provided	
✔ Greater time/effort invested in application by applicant	

3. Merit-Based with Intake Periods

3.1 Program Description and Intent

This approach treats all applicants equally with a set cost-share level. It utilizes a competitive process rather than relying on first-come, first-served, meaning applications are accepted within assigned "intake" periods established throughout the year. All applications are reviewed collectively upon the close of the intake and compared against one another. An assessment tool must be developed with this approach in order to isolate projects that offer significant benefit for the topic at hand.

The Implementation component of Growing Forward 2 (GF2) for producers is an example of this model in action. Within this program, each of the six focus areas covers a series of preferred BMPs. A scoring system developed by OSCIA and OMAFRA helps select the top-ranking projects within each focus area.

3.2 Successes

The EBI was developed with input from technical subject matter experts to eliminate the need for an application review committee and to keep the review process objective and unbiased. An efficient process was needed to make timely and defendable decisions, recognizing the potential to receive several hundred applications within an intake. The process developed sorts, ranks and evaluates projects; only applications that score highly according to the established program parameters will be funded. This allows the targeting of funds to the highest quality projects that offer the greatest benefit for each eligible activity. Use of the EBI also allows for tracking of project impacts at the farm level, which supports performance measurement.

Set intake periods remove the first-come, first-served jockeying for funding, allowing applicants to slow down and think through proposed projects. Applications are accepted throughout the length of an intake period and how early they are submitted has no bearing on whether they will receive funding.

3.3 Challenges

Misconceptions on how scoring is applied can be damaging for applicants. With GF2, for example, there is a perception amongst some farmers that applications receive funding based on how well the proposal is written. Some have concluded that the use of expert consultants will boost chances of being successful in securing cost-share allocations. This is truly not the case; rather, funding decisions rely on how well the project scores based on the answers provided in the EBI, which consists primarily of a series of check boxes and does not require written, long-form responses.

The application and evaluation system can be seen as complex and are not yet well understood by the farming community. The application process is lengthier (relative to first-come, first-served), program-specific and requires more upfront work by farmers without any additional guarantees of being able to receive funding.

Some participants wish to submit multiple applications per intake with the belief that it will heighten their chances of securing an allocation. Parameters must be placed around this type of participation to maintain the integrity of a competitive system.

Merit-based with Intakes

Applicant standpoint	
Strengths:	**Weaknesses:**
✔ Predictable cost-share amount available ✔ Check-box style application ✔ Applications must be submitted during an intake period, allowing for time to thoroughly prepare a thoughtful application	✗ Time required to gather supplemental information and complete paper work ✗ Potential difficulty finding specialists to provide cost estimates ✗ Lowest scoring applications will be denied funding
Program delivery standpoint	
Strengths:	**Weaknesses:**
✔ Able to compare projects and evaluate impact with merit-based component ✔ Able to track benefits at the farm-level ✔ Does not require an expert panel process to review applications	✗ Higher administration and overhead costs to develop, review and periodically refine merit measurement tool ✗ Ongoing application submission requires ongoing program delivery resources

4. Conservation Tender

4.1 Program Description and Intent

Within the conservation tender approach, cost-share levels are determined by the individual farm business. Applicants identify the amount of funding necessary for them to complete the proposed project, based on the financial needs of the farm business. This system aims to acknowledge and support the broad range of needs represented within the farming community, providing individually catered proposals for each application submitted. Rather than utilizing a one size fits all approach, the Conservation Tender model tasks individual applicants to identify their own needs.

The application process is also competitive, meaning applications are accepted within a pre-established intake window and evaluated against one another to determine which submissions provide the greatest benefit for the periodic dollars invested. Significant interest in a program of this nature results in larger numbers of funding requests and a greater proportion of applications being turned down. This model works the most effectively at achieving targets when larger percentages of applications received are turned down, however, careful communications strategies are also critical to ensure applicants are fully aware of this factor and to ensure frustration does not become a concern. Detailed comments from application reviewers on rejected projects are helpful in alleviating this issue.

This model requires the collection of a variety of details at the application stage. An EBI needs to be created to determine which projects are offering the highest benefit to the public. The EBI is developed using available science to guide the creation of key questions. The more robust the EBI, the better the outcome.

Two current examples of the conservation tender approach developed and delivered by OSCIA are the Grassland Habitat Farm Incentive Program (GHFIP) and the Water's Edge Transformation Program (WET).

The goal of GHFIP is to sustain habitat in Ontario for grassland bird species, specifically the Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark, which are dependent on hayfields, pastures, meadows and native prairies for survival. The program relies on a competitive bid system and a unique EBI to identify and reward the proposed projects that show the greatest environmental merit for government dollars invested.

Applicants must include details and costs of projects they'd like to complete, a detailed site sketch or aerial photograph/map of their operation with pasture and hay fields clearly identified, knowledge of vegetation in their fields, and information on their grazing management system. The competitive bid process allows applicants to compete against

other farms to justify project costs by identifying the unique benefits associated with their specific project.

WET is a program designed to encourage the adoption of BMPs to lessen water quality issues, limit nutrient leaching and runoff, and reduce overall on-farm vulnerabilities in the Lake Simcoe, Nottawasaga, and Severn Sound watersheds. Applicants must have a stream, shoreline, or wetland on their property and, in addition to the regular application, must also submit a completed Riparian Field Workbook. This workbook must be completed with the help of a watershed specialist from one of the three partnering stewardship groups.

For GHFIP, the EBI score is developed without requiring farmers to secure additional on-site technical support. It uses responses to detailed questions about the farm property's field cover, management and overall composition, such as the percentage of grasses versus legumes, trees to fields / hedgerows to help determine the potential for grassland bird habitat. The EBI was developed in consultation with grassland bird biologists. The score is completely veiled throughout the application process and the farm participant is never provided the numerical result.

WET, by comparison, requires applicants to gain input from watershed specialists through a local stewardship group to assess the farm site's potential for water quality improvements. The change in activity proposed within the application is analyzed and incorporated into a project's EBI. By demonstrating the change in scoring associated with specific actions, the system aims to assist farm participants in the decision making process, helping to quantify the impact of various management practices.

4.2 Outcomes and Successes

The EBIs developed for both GHFIP and WET are more sophisticated and technical than the EBIs developed for Growing Forward 2 Implementation. This allows for many different projects to be compared to one another on an equal footing, with a very specific outcome in mind. Moreover, although the bid process is competitive, decisions are not always based on the 'lowest dollar wins' principle, but rather on getting the best projects in the best places at a reasonable cost.

For WET in particular, a very collaborative EBI was developed that goes well beyond simply asking farmers whether they've completed an EFP. Instead, it refers to the riparian section of their actual completed EFP and incorporates those responses into the evaluation process. This requires applicants to return to their EFP workbook and become reacquainted with their previously set operational goals. A modest stipend was paid to the local stewardship group for each completed bid they assisted with. The payment recognized the valuable technical contribution made by the technical specialist.

Requiring the input of a watershed specialist for WET is helping to build relationships between farmers and conservation authorities and local stewardship organizations.

The lack of set cost-share levels encourages farmers to develop a realistic funding request for their projects. Review of the submissions is conducted by OSCIA's Guelph office. Biologists and other specialists may be involved in the development of the original EBI but are not involved in the application of it. All proposals receive a straight yes or no answer, which supports the development of well-researched, realistic proposals. High quality projects have the potential to receive high levels of funding.

For the 2013-14 year, numerous applications were received for both programs during the different intake periods. A program evaluation completed for GHFIP demonstrates that the majority of producers are either very satisfied or satisfied with their GHFIP projects. An evaluation for the WET program was underway at the time of writing this report.

4.3 Challenges

One of the challenges for some applicants of the WET program has been the requirement for a watershed specialist on-site to help with completion of the supplementary workbook. GHFIP does not have this requirement, a reflection of the reality that many Conservation Authorities have a watershed specialist on staff but generally not a lot of resources or staff biologists dedicated to grasslands and grassland species.

WET is currently only available in three major watersheds and not province-wide; if the program was to broaden in geographic scope, the technical expert requirement would have to be scoped out to determine practicalities.

Experience to date suggests that programs following this model have tended to attract quite a mix of farm enterprises (e.g. large and small, alternative farms and conventional operations). The amount of work required to complete an application is considerable and there is no guarantee of success to the applicant. In addition, like other programs, the 'online only' component is a barrier to some applicants.

Through repeated intakes with GHFIP, momentum and comfort has been experienced by the delivery agent and repeat participants. OSCIA is now able to reasonably predict whether the financial bid and EBI score are sufficient to likely earn approval. Ultimately, it is the available program budget that determines which of the highest-ranking projects will be approved for funding.

Conservation Tender

Applicant standpoint	
Strengths:	**Weaknesses:**
✔ Ability to self-determine level of cost-share necessary to complete a project	✗ Time required to gather supplemental information and complete paper work

✔ Ability to describe project in detail ✔ Ability to learn more about operation through potential collaboration with CA specialists (e.g. WET)	✗ Potential difficulty gauging amount of funding available ✗ Difficult to determine cost-share request without knowledge of other bids
Program delivery standpoint	
Strengths: ✔ Does not require an expert panel process to review applications ✔ Able to compare projects and evaluate impact with merit-based component (EBI) ✔ Able to track benefits at the farm-level ✔ Potential liaisons created between producers and local groups (WET)	**Weaknesses:** ✗ Higher administration and overhead costs (for merit measurement tool development, application development, assessment etc.) ✗ More involvement from technical experts necessary during both program design and application phase [WET]

Conclusion

In all of its program design activities, OSCIA strives to maximize the benefits for its three primary audiences:

- **Funding agents**: these agencies have very specific goals of what they would like individual programs to accomplish and OSCIA works to build a system for each specific program it delivers that will provide measureable results to meet the needs of the funding agent.
- **OSCIA Board of Directors**: the farmers responsible for providing direction to the organization want to ensure that OSCIA completes activities in the best interest of its membership and focuses on its mandate of responsible economic management of soil, water, air and crops by developing and communicating innovative farming practices.
- **Farmers:** programs must be equally accessible to the individuals who live on and work the land, and provide them with a benefit in return for their efforts. Ensuring that programs are well explained and creating reasonable application processes will encourage uptake and help achieve program goals and outcomes. If a program is too cumbersome or restrictive, barriers will be created and the uptake will be very limited, failing to achieve its intended goals and outcomes.

Currently, there is diversity in the program models and offerings used by OSCIA. Each has its challenges and benefits and it is not an easy task to fundamentally alter long-standing practices that the farm community recognizes and is familiar with.

In addition, since each program focuses on different facets of on-farm stewardship, finding one program and project evaluation model that works for all programs is likely not a suitable or realistic solution.

Efforts are underway to streamline and improve all of these models as programs evolve and feedback on design and implementation continues to be received. These efforts are being made in consideration of the need to allocate funds based on projects' measurable societal and environmental benefits.

OSCIA genuinely appreciates the confidence expressed by the participating funding agents and benefits greatly from the collaborative spirit conveyed.

For further details on the information contained in this document, please contact Christine Schmalz, Senior Environmental Programs Coordinator, at christine.schmalz@ontariosoilcrop.org.