

## **Conservation Behaviours and Attitudes in the Upper Thames and Grand River Watersheds**

Resources management professionals in southwestern Ontario have expressed concern about the fate of conservation lands on the landscape as agricultural land prices have increased to unprecedented levels and commodity prices have fluctuated in recent years. A recent study of rural landowners in the Upper Thames and Grand River watersheds assessed conservation behaviours and attitudes, using data from a survey administered in the spring of 2013. Landowner behaviour was measured by having respondents report the acreage of conservation lands, such as trees, that they had added or removed from their property since 2006. Landowner attitudes were measured using a conservation ethic index constructed from several responses in the survey. While the study assessed all 3,227 survey respondents, a more detailed statistical analysis was conducted on a subset of 627 respondents considered to be farmers. For this study, farmers were defined as those respondents who reported owning 100 acres of land or more, with at least 50% of their income coming from farm receipts.

Analysis of the information provided by the 627 farm respondents found that farmers with larger land holdings exhibit more conservation oriented behaviour. Interestingly, there was no statistical relationship found between farm size and farm respondent's attitudes about conservation. The study found that farmers that have owned their land for a longer period of time exhibit more conservation oriented behaviour and a stronger conservation ethic. It was also determined that farmers with higher debt loads tend to have lower conservation ethic scores, and that older farmers exhibit more conservation oriented behaviour than younger farmers.

The study provides a significant amount of data about rural landowners across the study area. One interesting and perhaps troubling finding relates to the formal education level of younger farmers. The 3,227 respondents report relatively high levels of formal education and the same is found for the 627 farmer respondents. However, when the responses for farmers are further analysed, it is found that less than 50% of farmers under the age of 40 have completed only a high school education. This finding varies significantly from the education level that is found in the aggregated data and in the general social sciences literature.

The study provides insights into the farm and rural landowner residents in the Upper Thames and Grand River watersheds. These insights can be used to refine existing extension programming or guide new programs in the study area and perhaps even beyond.

Some caution does need to be exercised when interpreting the findings. For example, while the survey may be capturing a recent shift in agriculture economics, the survey does represent a snap shot in time and commodity prices have retreated somewhat since the spring of 2013. The response rate was 18% and while this is actually a very good response rate for the non-targeted survey method that was used, the results may still be influenced by non-response bias. Also, the concept of conservation in this study was focused on physical conservation lands such as wetlands, trees and fallow lands. Soil conservation best management practices were not considered.

The study has allowed for the creation of a rich data base of information that is relatively current. The data should be further analysed to isolate categories of landowners and the varying attitudes and behaviours that these categories exhibit. The study would also benefit greatly from secondary analysis such as a follow up study to explore non-response bias.

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