



COMMENTARY

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Environment Platforms Need Agriculture

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As Manitoba's election gets into full swing, there has been a lot of talk about the environment. Each party is announcing their “green” platform, and that's a good way to ensure that agriculture gets its due time in the election debates. The reason is simple: Farmers are part of the environmental solution, and each party would be well advised to make sure their commitments take advantage of agriculture's ability to provide real environmental benefits to this province.

First, we need to take a look at the big picture. Manitoba's farmers own the majority of the landscape in the province, and so the best way to have the greatest environmental impact is to have us on side. In fact, farmers have taken the lead in environmental stewardship, but could use a few extra tools to help have an even better impact. This is where government hopefuls should focus their platforms – it's the best way to provide the most bang for the public buck.

The next provincial government should be committed to starting a province-wide Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) program to do just that. ALUS is an incentive-based program that would pay farmers and landowners for the environmental services they provide, which would include things like cleaner air and water and wildlife habitat. The first ALUS pilot project is already up and running in the Rural Municipality of Blanshard in Manitoba, and its success should be a model for each party to build on during this campaign.

Farmers are also expecting that nutrient management regulations will be moving forward over the next year. We have been very involved in ongoing discussions with government departments to develop something that is workable on the farm and also provides additional environmental protection. In some cases, farmers could be asked to make some really significant changes in their operations. Again, farmers have said they're willing to make this leap, but only if government is willing to support our increased role in environmental protection. During the campaign, parties will have to explain how they plan to implement the nutrient management regulation, and what incentives they plan to have in place to protect the environment and the future sustainability of all farm operations.

It's clear that environment is a top issue for Manitobans heading into this election. Farmers should be calling on the candidates to put forward a clear plan on incentive-based approaches that can help the next government achieve its green goals.