



COMMENTARY

“The Voice of Manitoba Farmers”

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Farmers, Nutrients & the City

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After being quoted in the Winnipeg Free Press last week in an article about a city councilor complaining about treating their wastewater while we as farmers are still using fertilizers, I received a lot of phone calls from farmers across Manitoba. They all wanted me to give a more complete response to the councilor's charges against agriculture, including that “the province isn't stopping farmers from using nitrogen.”

The reason for not stopping farmers from using nitrogen is because it's an essential part of the crop growth cycle, along with phosphorus and other nutrients. Our fertilizers – whether chemical or organic – are applied to the land at the optimal rate for plant growth and yields. The vast majority of the nutrients that we apply are used by the plants, and never travel beyond the field because they're removed in the crops we harvest.

On my farm, I test my soils on a regular basis to make sure that we're using the right amount of nutrients for the crops we grow – and I know that the vast majority of farmers in Manitoba are good land and nutrient managers.

We continue to do a better job by implementing new farming techniques and applied technology as they become available. Some of this is done in a cost-sharing agreement with governments (just like the City of Winnipeg) but the majority are done completely at the farmers' own expense.

Compare this with the City of Winnipeg's nutrient management plan. An article by reporter Bartley Kives (*How it works: Winnipeg's wastewater system*, February 2, 2008) noted that the City discharges untreated wastewater into the city's rivers 16 to 18 times over an average year. Even with the upgrades that the city councilor is talking about, they're still expecting to dump wastewater four times a year.

And just to clarify the whole picture: The Lake Winnipeg Stewardship Board's final report notes that all of agriculture contributes about 5% of the nitrogen in Lake Winnipeg and about 15% of the phosphorus. The City of Winnipeg contributes 4% of nitrogen and 5% of phosphorus. Considering that farmers manage 87% of Manitoba's landscape, agriculture's contribution to nitrogen levels is relatively small, mainly because our best management practices and government regulations have traditionally

focused only on this nutrient. With the new focus on phosphorus – and with some appropriate support from government – I am confident that farmers will make significant reduction in our phosphorus contributions as well.

If you think that farmers are tired of being told that we're always the culprit when it comes to water quality, you're absolutely right. When we were asked to manage nitrogen levels, we did our best to do so. Now that phosphorus management is added to the mix, we've always said that we'll do our part with appropriate supports – after all, even the City of Winnipeg's plan will be cost-shared among all taxpayers.