

A fertilizer made to save the planet

Green Expectations

A Pickering company is offering a product touted to build soil life and earn carbon credits to boot

Tuesday, November 21, 2006

Tag: 0611200921

Edition: Final

Section: News

Length: 97 lines

Page: B23

Column: Green Expectations

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Ian Cumming insists he's not a tree hugger. But he's got a plan with the potential to not only meet all of Canada's obligations under the Kyoto climate change treaty but also save farmers a bundle on their fertilizer and chemical input bill.

"I'm a businessman," he says in a strong Scottish accent. And after several decades of commercializing technological innovations - such as the machines you swipe during every Interac transaction - he has now set his sights on selling fertilizer.

Not just any fertilizer, mind you. This is an organic product, developed in Australia, available in liquid or slow-release granular form that, Cumming says, will "return soil biota to a healthy state. The worm population will just explode." In the process it'll also substantially reduce or even eliminate the need for pesticides or fungicides because a healthy soil is less susceptible to these problems, he says.

But this is not just a story about a supposedly new and improved soil amendment. There's another angle here. That thriving population of soil organisms will also be much more efficient than normal farm soils at taking carbon from the atmosphere and storing it in an environmentally safe place - underground. As a result, Cumming, through his Intelegacy Corporation of Pickering, expects to sell carbon credits on behalf of the producer who's using his product. That will substantially reduce the farmer's fertilizer bill, he adds.

Approach Cumming on this topic and you're likely to be in for a lengthy conversation. One thing's for sure - he's done his homework. Perhaps the most impressive aspect is that he's been able to work out a protocol for trading carbon credits on the futures market through the United Nations agency charged with certifying such transactions. He says that will allow him to sell credits to governments, energy companies, anyone finding themselves strapped to meet their greenhouse gas obligations.

He has been in contact with the federal government but says there's an apparent lack of urgency on the subject within the Parliamentary halls even though he is promising that his product alone could help Canada meet its Kyoto commitment by 2012. If that attitude continues "we'll sell it offshore," he insists.

Cumming says Canada has been slow to recognize the potential of carbon sequestration to solve our climate change woes. "It could well be the one thing that will enable us to keep burning fossil fuels." Unfortunately watching federal politicians and bureaucrats

stumble around on the issue is like "watching someone trying to break into a safe when I'm standing there holding out the key."

CUMMING IS TOO much of a realist to expect farmers to buy into his plan, or use his fertilizer, just because they want to save the planet. "It has to make sense from a business standpoint," he says. "This will reduce farmers' costs immediately."

The example he uses is that of a 1,500-acre operation using about \$200,000 worth of commercial fertilizer. By using the fish waste-based FX-Harvest fertilizer and selling the carbon credits that farmer could save himself between \$100,000 and \$200,000 a year, he says.

Costs will be higher in the first year because it takes time to rebuild soil organisms. Once the worm population and the other critters increase in numbers the input bill will drop - to about 50 per cent of first-year rates by the third season.

Usually it takes a decade or two to rebuild a depleted soil but this fertilizer will do it in three years, he promises.

To ward off the skeptics Cumming has commissioned a soil life survey to be done by the University of Prince Edward Island in conjunction with the PEI agriculture ministry. Researchers will travel to Australia and take samples from fields where the fertilizer has been used for varying amounts of time as well as fields that have never seen the product.

He admits it would be much cheaper to just send soil samples to the labs but suggests that would create some doubt about where those samples really originated, he says. "We don't want to be involved in the process."

The results of that survey should be available next year and will be reported in an Ontario Farmer follow-up article.

HERE'S HOW CUMMING'S plan will work from the farmer's standpoint: by the end of this year or early next year you'll be able to go to the Intelegacy web site at www.intelegacy.com, log in and complete a short "global warming" survey to build a profile of your farm. Details requested will be the field location, soil type, previous crops, fertilizer history, etc. At the end, Cumming says you'll get a report that documents just how much you'll be spending and how much savings you can expect from switching to the FX fertilizer.

While the FX fertilizer will be "competitively" priced, Cumming admits that it's the carbon credit rebate that will make the deal attractive by substantially reducing the bill.

Web site visitors will also be able to view farmer testimonials and research results.

To meet anticipated demand, Intelegacy is building a liquid fertilizer plant and adjacent granular plant in a yet-to-be-announced Canadian location. The product has Canadian Food Inspection Agency approval and can therefore be sold anywhere in Canada, he says.

Intelegacy will accept orders beginning with the 2007 season.

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