

Value pinned on local ecosystem services

Province-wide initiative enjoys broad support

by RONDA PAYNE



Rehabilitating compromised riparian areas needs to be recognized for its social value, a concept not lost on Dave Melnychuk and rural property owner Nancy Knott. RONDA PAYNE PHOTO

LANGLEY – Nature and water are priceless resources but the David Suzuki Foundation wants to give them a value to stop people from taking them for granted.

“We wanted to describe what are the values nature provides,” says Jay Richlin, the foundation’s director general, BC and Western region. “It’s no longer priceless or worthless, but what is the value?”

Richlin spoke during a tour the Langley Sustainable Agriculture Foundation (LSAF) hosted in May focused on Ecological Services Initiative (ESI) activities in Langley.

The foundation’s project is an exploration of payment for ecosystem services (PES) where the benefits people derive from healthy ecosystems are defined and those who improve these systems are compensated. The research of the David Suzuki Foundation digs into eight services provided by riparian areas: water purification and waste treatment, water flow regulation, erosion regulation, air quality regulation, climate regulation, recreational benefits, species at risk habitat and aesthetic.

Something like a tree or a forest is hard to put a value on. However, if a forest on a stream bank is destroyed, the costs to reinforce the bank with concrete and other materials can be estimated.

“That’s, in a nutshell, what we try to do with ecological services with farming,” Richlin says. “[Farmers] know that when their land is in good shape, their food is in good shape.”

He adds that most farmers have a desire to help with the environment, but cost is a factor. Programs like the ESI help make that funding happen. It helps to close the gap between what the farmer can afford and the work that needs to be done.

“Agriculture is one of the places where we feel [PES] will work,” he says. “We can tell you how valuable it is to have a bunch of trees to prevent

your farm from washing away.”

Around the world, more than 30 countries are involved with PES organizations. About 70 of the organizations are established enough that the David Suzuki Foundation can use their data to apply to Canadian PES projects. Richlin sees the work of LSAF and ESI in areas such as the Bertrand Creek as being on par with some of the best environmental work globally that helps assign values and preserve ecosystems.

“It’s an incredibly valuable test area that you’re using,” says Richlin. “As this riparian habitat takes hold ... it’s worth around \$2 million a year.”

The dollar value is based on the eight services riparian areas provide, and while the value varies due to a range of factors, the fact that a number exists helps define the importance of what’s taking place.

“We have to look at the benefits over time,” he notes. “All of these [eight services] are real services that can be measured. We’ve done

these types of experiments in all kinds of areas and established values.”

Next steps in the David Suzuki Foundation’s process will include supporting Farmland Advantage, a five-year research and development project supported by government, the BC Agriculture Council and other organizations.

Advocating for pricing mechanisms for ecological services from various governmental bodies and refining studies for stronger business cases are also on the foundation’s agenda.

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