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Amalgamated Dairies Limited members Janet Stewart and John Wood. Wood is the co-owner of Craggan Farms and a DUC partner.

Wetlands: a valuable farmhand

WETLANDS DELIVER ECOLOGICAL AND FINANCIAL DIVIDENDS TO DAIRY FARMERS IN P.E.I.

By Julielee Stitt

It's not unusual for John Wood to catch sight of a brood of ducks while going about his chores.

"Our wetland is right beside the barn, so we get to keep a close eye on it," says Wood. Some days he'll spot blue or green-winged teal, on others he'll encounter black ducks, wigeons or gadwalls. "I enjoy seeing them," he says.

Along with his father, David, Wood operates Craggan Farms Ltd. a 180-acre (72-hectare) dairy farm, located five kilometres outside of Charlottetown, in the community of Marshfield, P.E.I.

The father-son duo milk 60 purebred Holstein cows, and are members of Amalgamated Dairies Limited (ADL), a producer-owned co-operative with dairy processing and retail food distribution facilities throughout the island province.

Wood says he enjoys the biodiversity the wetland adds to his property. As a business owner, he also appreciates the practical role it plays on his farm, helping filter milk house wastewater and liquid that runs off his manure storage facility.

"Many dairy producers we work with are looking for ways to deal with milk house wash," says Jonathan Platts, a Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) conservation program specialist, referring to the wastewater produced when farmers sanitize milking equipment. The water contains soaps, detergents, and fat content.

"Farmers don't want to let that wastewater run through their barnyard or into a nearby stream," adds Platts. To deal with the problem, producers may install an in-ground septic system, which can block-up, as a result of the fat content in the wastewater.

Platts says DUC offers another option: constructed wetlands.

DUC constructed the Craggan Farms' wetland in 2004 on land Wood describes as "swampy" and inactive, as part of the Small Marsh Restoration Program.

Wastewater runs through a series of treatment cells in the constructed wetland. A settling cell, where the primary treatment occurs, allows the manure, straw or hay to drop out. A secondary system removes the chlorines and detergents. Then, the water filters into a tertiary system, which is either a natural or man-made wetland.

"[The wetland] works really well for us," says Wood. "We don't have to find another solution to deal with wastewater and it's good for the environment," he adds.

Since 2004, the Small Marsh Restoration Program has delivered 104 projects on farm land like the Woods'.

Administered by DUC, the Small Marsh Restoration Program is funded by the Eastern Habitat Joint Venture, and receives support from both provincial and federal governments, as well as farmer-led organizations like ADL.

ADL has supported DUC for 12 years through donations that help fund wetland restoration on agricultural lands, as well as by raising awareness of DUC's work among members of the co-operative.

Supporting an environmental non-governmental organization such as DUC, is just one way dairy farmers in P.E.I. are safeguarding natural landscapes, says ADL CEO James Bradley.

"The men and women in the dairy industry continue to be leaders, working to protect, preserve and enhance the environment," says Bradley. "And wetlands certainly perform quite a vital role, whether it's helping the ecosystem clean the water as a natural filter, or providing habitat."

"P.E.I. is an agricultural landscape," says Platts. "And our farmers here are one of our biggest partners."