

Soil Health Producer Highlights Series

My Farm, My Soil, My Story

Al & Marilee Toews—Fort Vermilion, AB

- * What does “Soil Health” mean to you and why is it important?

As with human health, healthy soils requires balanced nutrients, fibre, diverse activities, monitoring and regular check-ups. We strive for a soil home where micro-organisms and other biota work together creating conditions suited to crop growth. The soil ecosystem is our lifeline !

- * What management practices have you used to improve soil health on your operation?

Nature’s ways, training in ecology and studying landscapes with plant communities on a range of soil types has guided management. Soil sample analysis for nutrients and organic matter, field and yield observations, education by reading and courses influence decisions. In 1997, we began a rewarding change. After 45 years of being farmed with synthetic inputs, our farm was transitioned and certified as organic.

Annual and perennial crop rotations, cover crops and intercropping build soil structure/ moisture holding capacity and prevent wind/ water erosion. Variations in seeding dates and rates, strategic timing for mulching and green manure plow down help control weeds. Natural habitat is maintained for shade, wind protection, to lessen evaporation, trap snow, and encourage native pollinators and insect predators.

- * What changes have you seen?

We attribute better moisture conditions to increased soil organic matter and practices reducing evaporation. Insect problems are rare as their predators prosper here.

- * What are the biggest challenges for soil health in your area?

Inadequate soil moisture and moisture conservation are ongoing concerns for which solutions are needed.

- * How do you advocate for soil health?

Soil health advocacy encompasses support for ongoing research, organic farmers, and farming methods.

- * Do you have any future plans for improving the Soil Health on your operation?

Consistent monitoring through soil testing and moisture records would help. Education and networking with farmers and researchers is a given.

- * How has improving your Soil Health improved other aspects of your operation?

Healthy soils generally produce good crops, positive economic returns and peace of mind. Growing safe, nutritious products and minimizing impact on the environment fulfills our mission.



Al and Marilee Toews have been growing forage and grain crops at Prairie Point, north of the Peace River near Fort Vermilion, for the last 42 years. They have been certified organic for the past 17 years



The Mackenzie Applied Research Association [MARA] is a not for profit producer driven applied research association. MARA serves producers in the Mackenzie County, the largest County in Alberta and the northernmost commercial agriculture region in Canada. MARA conducts agriculture and environmental research from its Fort Vermilion, Alberta location. MARA is proud to serve the largest number of organic producers in Alberta.

