

Farmers not forgotten in heritage study

By Hugo Rodrigues
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WOODSTOCK — With the science almost complete, the time for developing some recommendations is upon the county-led natural heritage study.

The Oxford Natural Heritage Study, which recently struck an implementation advisory committee, is moving towards providing the county with a set of recommendations aiming to strike a balance between private land use and protection.

Chairing the committee is county Coun. Jim Hayes, who is mayor of South-West Oxford, a businessman and a landowner.

"We're optimistic the implementation advisory committee will recommend a 'made in Oxford' approach ... that will be balanced and fair and consider the concerns of private landowners," Hayes said in a statement.

The implementation committee is a new twist to the natural heritage study, said Upper Thames River Conservation Authority co-ordinator of hydrology and regulatory services Jeff Brick.

"(Farmers) were very concerned about regulation being the only angle," Brick said. "In response to that, we decided to change the structure ... to add the whole dimension of how the study should be implemented."

County Coun. Michael Harding, who chairs the study's steering committee, said an implementation committee was an important condition of moving forward.

"This needs to be seen as an Oxford County council

initiative ... that needs to be very sensitive and aware of the sensitivity of agriculture," Harding said. "The heavy lifting will be done by (this committee) ... They have to determine what is possible."

Fellow steering committee member Jim Magee, who represents the Oxford County Federation of Agriculture, noted the committee meetings should produce some interesting discussions.

"As farmers we own most of the land, but there are other people out there who are interested in what goes on in the landscape," Magee said. "One thing we're likely to find out is that we in agriculture haven't done too bad of a job in the environment."

Magee volunteered his own cattle farm in Blandford-Blenheim Township for an aquatic survey this summer and said he was astounded with the quantity and quality of the fish it turned up.

Brick said the scientific collection of information on woodlots, woodlands and aquatic features within Oxford is almost complete. He hopes that by the turn of the year, the implementation committee can come up with its recommendations on how to use the data.

Surveys, aerial photography and satellite imagery were used for terrestrial features, with onsite work in rivers and streams still occurring, he said.

If all goes according to plan, county council should receive the study report in the fall of 2006, after which Harding said its recommendations would likely be incorporated into Oxford's planning documents.