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Why's of Agriculture: Why don't farmers farm the WHOLE field?

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It's spring and we can now see the fields galore. Some darkened with soil as far as the eye can see, others with more dead grass than anything, but majority are the in-between. Dark, rich soil, cultivated and ready to be sown with the new years' crop, but with grassy strips and patches all about. A fine mix. Each of the fields, and the features within the fields providing different values and are managed as such.

Of course we have year round grassy fields, known as pastures where cows graze. We have hay fields, which while it is seeded as a crop, are simply reseeded more often than they are cultivated and broken up. Both of which require a fairly long-term if not permanent land use. Because of this it can be difficult to tell where the crop ends and the wetlands and trees begin on these fields.

And then there's the annual crop fields. Cultivated in the fall and/or spring. Generally obvious by the lack of plant material. These are the fields that you can really see the different land features well on this time of year. While most of the ground space in these fields are utilized for crops, it's not uncommon to see large grassy buffers around low lands, wetlands, trees and steeply sloped areas. You might wonder why though. I mean, more field equals more crop equals more money.. Right?

Well, when maintained, these areas too can have great value to the farmers and their crops – Annual, perennial, livestock, whatever! Grass buffers rule.

I could go on a long-winded rant about all the fantastic things grass buffers can do, but it's also important to note that not all land uses are appropriate for these situations. As an example, let's just focus on moisture. We know that grassy buffers slow run-off waters and collect water into the land which is usually a great thing. Though when it comes to certain crops too much moisture can have negative impacts and actually reduce crop quality and yield.



So when it comes to a field there are a lot of things out farmers take into consideration for how it will be used and maintained: current and future crops, materials and equipment, costs, time, pests and wildlife, climate conditions and of course other environmental and geographical factors relating to the land itself. And while farmers aren't psychic, it would sure help!

Each month we'll dig into a new 'Why?', or in this case 'How?', of agriculture. If you have an agricultural question you'd like me to dig into let me know at adelaney@rdcounty.ca