Money Management 2014

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Our advisers can do better

There’s no question that much of the progress that farmers have made in the past five years has come from the quality of advice they have received.

It’s impossible to weave an accurate statistical story of the progress agriculture has made since the bull market began in 2007, but I’m convinced that most farmers have made prudent decisions of how to handle the returns from those years.

Most farmers have positioned themselves as well to even more efficient in future. I know that some farmers have overinvested in machinery, and that this may come to haunt them. There will be others who have ignored the opportunity to pay down debt and have paid too much for land.

But by and large, farmers have made wise decisions in areas where they have expertise, or where they know how to assess the expertise of the people they are listening to. Farmers aren’t investing in just any machinery. They’re investing in the machinery that aligns with what they’re learning from agronomists, soil scientists and a host of others. Plus, I’m continually impressed at the increasing sophistication of farmers’ commodity marketing, based on their careful evaluation of the advice that is available from a growing number of sources.

The short and the long of it is, when farmers have the tools to assess their advisers, they make shrewd decisions about whose advice they will take.

But this cannot be as easily said for the legal and accounting advice they are receiving, not because farmers lack the brains to figure it out, but because they lack the ability to make informed, competent decisions among potential advisers.

It’s true that in aggregate, the financial and legal advice farmers are getting today is more sophisticated than it was a generation ago when more farmers relied on bookkeepers than on accountants. But the complexity of farm operations and their need for sophisticated advise have grown by an even greater amount.

Too many of these professionals are learning the farm portion of their business on the job, which puts farmers at great risk.

Too many farmers too are frustrated and often stymied by the conflicting advice they get from different channels.

In such a specialized industry, when the whole future of an operation can ride on the details of its incorporation, for example, word of mouth isn’t a good enough way for a farmer to assess their advisers. We had hoped the Canadian Association of Farm Advisers would make greater strides in this direction. We agree — the association has helped. But it has not helped enough. It will come up with myriad excuses to explain why, but in the end none really amount to more than saying to your clients, “well, too bad for you.”

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The fall of 2014 will be remembered for all the improvements that manufacturers are making in small commercial tractors in the 120- to 220-horsepower class. Despite the trend towards “bigger, wider and more powerful,” these tractors are showing they can compete based on nimbleness, adaptability and durability. Below, we feature offerings from four different manufacturers, but be forewarned. There’s much more information waiting for you from the manufacturers. It can be a big job to select the right small tractor.

**John Deere 6R Series**

Just in time for 2015, John Deere is rolling out its improvements on the 6R series tractors. Five extra horsepower levels have been added to the 6R lineup, with the company pointing to higher productivity in the field as the overall advantage. The higher specs on these machines include Final Tier 4-compliance, along with Intelligent Power Management that provides as much as a 40-horsepower boost when conditions demand it. There are also new remote rear couplers similar to those on the 7R and 8R series tractors, making attaching and detaching implements easier. Inside the cab, you’ll find a new CommandARM, complete with a standard seven-inch touch-screen display, with a 10-inch model as an available option.

[www.deere.com](http://www.deere.com)

**Challenger MT500E Series**

Boost power and increase efficiency, and you get the new MT500E series from Challenger, with five new models available in the series. All feature the AGCO Power Tier 4-Final 6.6- or 7.4-litre, six-cylinder diesel engine. The company says the new engines provide a significant bump in power compared to previous designs, and all are equipped with dual alternators and third-generation selective catalytic reduction (SRC) technology. They also come with the no-shift smooth operation of CVT — a continuously variable transmission. In the cab, there’s even a new front dash display, featuring a setup and information screen (SIS) boasting 10 times greater resolution and 50 per cent larger area for easier viewing and less fatigue.

[www.challenger-ag.us](http://www.challenger-ag.us)
FENDT 700 SERIES

Turning heads takes more than a roar from the engine. What really matters is how you put the entire machine together, including everything under the hood and in the cab. Fendt has taken its 700 series tractors, made them easier to operate and also reinforced the series’ structure. The new 700 series boasts six models, five of which fall within the 120- to 220-horsepower class, and all are available in the Profi and ProfiPlus option packages, including stronger front axles to handle higher payloads and enhanced steering capabilities. Of course, each 700 series unit comes equipped with the Fendt Vario continuously variable transmission (CVT). There’s also a new four-speed, 1000E PTO, which means higher operating efficiency and an expanded range of PTO applications.

www.fendt.com/us

MASSEY FERGUSON 7700 SERIES

Working those longer days that stretch into the night might not seem as daunting when you see what Massey Ferguson is building into its 7700 series tractors. Five models — four of them in the 120- to 220-horsepower class — are available with a Tier 4-Final, six-cylinder AGCO Power 6.6- and 7.4-Litre diesel engine, pushing the limits on power in the 7700 series. According to the company, this series boasts turbochargers with new electronic wastegates which can actually anticipate power needs, along with improved engine response and high torque, no matter the r.p.m.s. The 7700 series has more than twice the front-suspension travel of previous designs. That means more power to the ground for reduced wheel slippage and power hop, plus superior steering control at higher speeds.

www.masseyferguson.com
LANDLOCKED IN AFRICA

Zambia is an optimistic but also a heartbreaking study in what might be — but isn’t — achievable in African agriculture

By Marianne Stamm
He long driveway into Lilayi Farm, just south of Lusaka, Zambia, is lined with large shade trees. Cattle graze in knee-deep grass, and halfway along the lane I find the building I have been told to look for.

It is the new polo clubhouse, where an international polo tournament will be hosted this weekend.

Alan Miller, owner of Lilayi Farm, waits for me in the office behind his computer. From there he can cast an eye not only toward the maintenance yard but also toward their steaming grain dryer and storage facilities.

This is one picture of Zambian agriculture... modern, high tech and efficient.

Five hours to the north, near Mpongwe, I find another picture. It is quite a different one.

Jessy Mpupulwa, above, symbolizes the whole country, growing bigger crops that he still must harvest by hand.

Jessy Mpupulwa is struggling to harvest his 150 acres of corn. He has the machinery to plant and spray the crop, but not yet to harvest it, so the corn must be picked by hand.

Jessy is one of a swelling number of emerging farmers — small-scale farmers who have grown beyond the hoe and oxen, and who have increasing financial and business skills, but are held back, among other things, by lack of access to credit.

Nearby, Jasinta Bulaya farms with the strength of her hands. Her brother’s oxen plow most of her fields, then she plants and weeds with her hoe, hiring help when she can afford it. Jasinta is a model small-scale farmer, using the conservation farming methods that others just talk of.

But Jasinta wants to break through to more. In fact she needs more, because she wants to send her son to agriculture college.

Zambia’s agriculture is a collage of what can be achieved in African agriculture, and also what isn’t being achieved.

The country has the potential to be Africa’s breadbasket. That’s a consensus that even Rabobank touts on the website for its Emergent Farmer program for Zambia.

Flying into the capital city of Lusaka, you look down to see irrigated crop circles that remind you of southern Alberta. To the northeast is the Mkushi farming block, where mostly white farmers grow immense tracts of tobacco, wheat, corn and soybeans, and where they also raise large herds of cattle.

A state-of-the-art grain-handling and processing facility there is farmer run and owned.

Then south of Lusaka, in Mazabuka on the road to the Victoria Falls, you drive through massive plantations of sugar cane, a growing industry here.

A congenial climate, plus fertile soils and some of Africa’s best waterways combine to make Zambia a farmer’s paradise.

But only for a few — the few produce almost all of the country’s surplus. Meanwhile, the greater part of Zambia’s farmers still struggle just to exist and eat.

COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS

“Zambia is far from reaching its potential agriculturally,” says Alan Miller. His 4,500-acre mixed farm is one of about 500 commercial farms in Zambia, many of which operate 10,000 acres or more.

Their farmyards rival the best in Canada with the latest grain augers rising about the shiny steel bins, and with the biggest and newest John Deere equipment standing ready in the shed.

Continued on page 12
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Make it Nexera™ and make more, NOW in more ways than one.

- Get healthier premiums, profits, demand for Omega-9 oils
- Healthier agronomics, profit to your potential either way
- New for 2015, the Nexera canola Flexibility Agreement™
- Grow Nexera WITH OR WITHOUT a contract
Almost all of Zambia’s commercial farmers are white, many from South Africa or Zimbabwe where they fled repressive conditions although Miller himself comes from one of the oldest farming families in the country.

He irrigates 1,100 acres with centre pivots fed by wells, including 600 acres of wheat and malting barley in the cooler, dry season from May to October followed by 300 acres of corn plus seed corn and soybeans during the November to April rainy season.

As well, Miller runs 125 acres of cabbages year round for a large retailer.

The rest of Lilayi Farm is either pasture land for the cattle herd, or used for hay, including for a thriving local forage market. Small farmers are raising more cattle, but don’t have the land to produce adequate feed.

“Irrigation is your insurance,” Miller says. Dryland corn yields between 45 and 160 bushels per acre. If the rains are late or if they stop at the wrong time, the consequences are severe.

Irrigation eliminates that risk, guaranteeing not only the moisture needed for pollination and grain fill, but also that the crop gets off to a fast, uniform start so it can tap the annual cycle of heat units and sunshine.

Weather isn’t the only issue, though. A big challenge for Zambian farmers comes from constantly changing government policies. When a government changes, it does more than bring in a new leader. All the ministers and civil servants change too.

That means farm organizations have to explain their cases and situations all over again.

This year, for instance, the Zambian government announced new water rights policies. Miller is concerned the change will cause considerable commotion and confusion among farmers. The new act is not really enforceable, he thinks. It doesn’t cover the availability correctly.

Getting the voice of farmers heard and listened to on such issues is essential, but it also takes energy that should ideally be invested in actual farming.

**IMPORTED INPUTS**

Most of Zambia’s farm inputs — fuel, fertilizer, chemicals, and machinery — are imported, and with the lack of saltwater access, plus poor rail infrastructure, everything arrives by truck, increasing prices.

The economic squeeze then continues on the other end. Government often puts tight restrictions on food exports, so farmers are captive to domestic markets. Neighbouring Zimbabwe, Angola and Congo need food, but can often get it from Russia or Ukraine, Miller says.

Interest rates are also high at 10 to 12 per cent for the U.S. dollar which most commercial farmers work with, since American currency is less prone to fluctuating inflation. By comparison, the Zambian kwacha has an interest rate of 28 per cent.

But for Miller, such constraints — bad as they are — aren’t as bad as his most costly challenge.

That’s theft. “That’s where the country’s problem really is,” says Miller. “The amount of work we spend checking and rechecking things, it really gets you down.”

Many years of experience have taught him where the problem losses are — bolts, fertilizer, soybean seed. And corn.

Zambia’s staple food disappears straight from the field. Lilayi Farm begins harvest with 22 per cent moisture, although millers demand 12.5 per cent for safe storage in the humid climate. He’d prefer to let it field dry, especially with locally high costs for fuel, but thieves won’t steal high-moisture corn that they can’t easily sell.

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MIDDLE SCALE

Jessy Mpupulwa owns two smaller tractors, a three-row planter, a 10-metre sprayer, a fertilizer spreader and a small truck. That puts him a good notch above Zambia’s small farmers but a long way from commercial operations like Miller’s. “Harvest is the bottleneck,” Mpupulwa says. He hires about 20 people for three months to help pick the ears, which are shelled by machine.

Labour is scarce during harvest. He sometimes transports workers from 180 km away who camp at the farm.

The long harvesting period gives thieves lots of opportunity to steal. Mpupulwa doesn’t have the options Miller does. He doesn’t have the machinery to get the crop off quickly. He doesn’t have the drying facilities, so he has to wait much longer for moisture to go down. Like many others, he cuts at least part of the corn and stooks it, so it’s easier to check. Mpupulwa spends a small fortune on 10 security guards for his crop.

One farmer recently complained that even security guards don’t stop the stealing. They just limit it to their own family and friends and family.

Mpupulwa was once manager of the coffee plantation of a very large commercial farm. He travelled, and gained a good sense of business and finance. (Dutch Gibson, consultant with the Conservation Farming Unit of Zambia, says one of the biggest problems of small farmers is that they are financially illiterate.)

But that edge doesn’t give Mpupulwa access to the credit he needs to grow. Banks don’t lend easily to black farmers. Mpupulwa says that’s due to a heavy rate of defaulting on loans by black farmers. Even were he to get credit, interest rates are a staggering 25 to 30 per cent for the local currency that small and emerging farmers work with.

Banks want land title as collateral, something few small farmers have. Mpupulwa is in the process of getting title to his land. Chiefs control the tribal lands, and are much more willing to sell to large companies who will pay good money than to allow the farmer on the land to get the land title.

“Farmers have the right to have ancestral land which they have inherited surveyed so that they can’t be displaced,” Mpupulwa says. “But there are few who do that.”

Mpupulwa is a member of the Zambian National Farmers Union (ZNFU) and takes advantage of the Lima Pak program to purchase inputs. The Lima project requires a 50 per cent down payment, the other 50 per cent after harvest. “The Lima Pak is reliable and has made farming much easier,” Mpupulwa says.

Immediately after Mpupulwa sells his corn, he purchases 25 per cent of the next crop’s inputs when they are at their seasonal lows. Few small farmers have that kind of cash.

Most small farmers sell to the FRA (Food Reserve Agency), a government program. It’s often a sale on credit. In the past, farmers might sometimes wait months for payment. The current government has improved that timing considerably, Mpupulwa says.

Farmers the size of Mpupulwa, who produces over 5,000 bags of corn (50 kg/bag), are in a better position. The miller will come to the farm to collect the corn. They can also negotiate a better price. Mpupulwa hopes to get about US$260/tonne for his corn. The floor price for the FRA is $200/tonne, while Lilayi Farm will get $270/tonne, because of its ability to deliver early.

“If we were given the same conditions as commercial farmers — forward sales, loans for inputs and combine harvesters — we would do as well or better,” Mpupulwa says. Not having that, they will remain stagnant. “We can’t get past the bottlenecks.”

Soils are deep and fertile, and Zambia’s climate allows year-round farming

Alan Miller, above, farms 4,500 acres. Jasinta Bulaya, right, crops just seven. Both believe they can succeed, but the challenges are very, very real.

Continued on page 63
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* Source: Manitoba Pulse Grower Association 2012/2013 Field Trials Results  † http://www.seedgrowers.ca/pdfs/top_10.pdf

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FOOD, PLUS THE FACTS

This Toronto chef serves great food, with a side of information so customers learn how lucky they are to have Canada’s farmers working for them

By Steven Biggs, CG Contributing Editor

Someone is getting screwed,” declares chef Brad Long. We’ve only just sat down at Long’s restaurant, Café Belong, and the conversation is already intense. I immediately like Long, who smiles and gesticulates as he talks a mile a minute, punctuating his thoughts with the odd F-bomb. It takes focus to keep up.

Even when he goes off on a tangent and I give up hope of ever getting back on topic, Long somehow manages it. Like now, when we’re back to the question of how he deals with people who ask him about his menu prices. He politely turns the tables on the questioner, asking them why so much food is so cheap. When the pause comes, as it usually does, he answers his own question, saying, “Someone is getting screwed.”

That someone, Long tells me, is the farmer. Or it’s the restaurateur. Rarely is it the guy in the middle. Long thinks it’s too bad that so many shoppers — and so many diners — don’t see this. For Long, the solution is communication.

I’ve read somewhere that he has a few acres, so I ask what he farms. “I’m not a farmer,” he says, explaining that he raises produce and livestock for his own family. (Long has five children, aged six through 18.) He’s a chef who is so passionate about good food that he grows his own, talks with farmers, and knows his local farm supply store, and before long, we’re off on another tangent, this time about crop rotations and soil organic matter.

When Long was executive chef for Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment, he was responsible for food at sports venues such as the Air Canada Centre and BMO field in Toronto. As part of that role, he’s fed his share of athletes. “Mats Sundin ate the brown rice,” he says with a smile. Others, he frowns, only wanted steak and didn’t heed his nutritional advice. Communication doesn’t always work.

ON RESTAURANTS

As a former co-host of the television show “Restaurant Makeover,” Long has looked at a lot of restaurants under the lens. “If you’re doing seven to eight per cent profit as an independent restaurateur, you’re doing good,” he says.

He attributes that single-digit margin partially to the profession attracting people with a passion for food and not enough business smarts. “We’re math idiots,” he sighs. For Long, part of the solution is to deal directly with producers. “What if I get rid of the guy in the middle?” he asks.

From the restaurateur’s perspective, one downside to dealing directly with producers is the time spent cultivating and managing relationships. Another is that some food is seasonal, meaning menus must be changed. It doesn’t deter Long, who feels there’s no creativity involved in producing the same menu year round. The menu on his website says, “Dishes, ingredients and prices are subject to change as menus are adapted daily.”

Another solution to low margins, he says, is to raise menu prices. “There’s a huge fear,” he says, as he talks about raising menu prices. And that is why communication is so important. He seems ready for the conversation, trotting out figures on historical changes in food prices relative to other goods, and on what Europeans spend on food compared to North Americans.

Long is partway through this thought when the crowd at the table next to us gets up to leave. One of the women, who introduces herself as Kerry, recognizes Long. She apologizes to me for interrupting our conversation, then gushes, “That salad… I dream about that salad.”

After Kerry and her table have left, he says to me,
“That salad should be good!” He uses expensive produce and the price on the menu reflects it. Young chefs, he says, often think they get such compliments because of culinary skill. “It’s not about my art,” he says, sounding exasperated. And he knows his produce is very good because he manages his suppliers very, very closely.

ON FOOD

Long clearly gives a lot of thought to food, but surprisingly, he isn’t down on McDonald’s, if it’s mixed into a healthy diet. “It’s about balance,” he says.

I glance around while Long takes a call on his cellphone. His restaurant is at Evergreen Brickworks, a former quarry and brick factory transformed into a public space that is used for environmental education. Outside the window is a water garden combining native plants and broken bricks. It’s historical, industrial — and trendy. Long’s restaurant fits well: shiny new metal and funky lights are paired with exposed ducts, beams, and a burnished concrete floor.

On shelves near the entrance he has jars of preserves and colourful enamelled cast iron cookware. It’s a touch that communicates his creds to the upmarket crowd that comes here on Saturdays for the farmers’ market.

Long thinks many foods have a story behind them. The trick is communicating that story to consumers — and making the story good enough that consumers change shopping habits. He tells me about a producer he knows who has done a good job telling the story of cold-pressed oils: how, in Italy, the really good olive oil is cold pressed; and how, in Ontario, there’s this great cold-pressed soybean oil. The story has to be well told, though, if it is going to get consumers to forsake cold-pressed olive oil.

Another thing to remember when telling the story, he says, is telling it to the right audience. It’s easy to tell our stories to people with whom we’re comfortable — people who are like us. He says he has often reflected on his own audience, then asked himself, “Why am I talking to old white guys all the time?” There is a greater potential to make a difference, he feels, when we reach out to new audiences.

His audiences include cooking classes. He says the last thing he wants to do is teach people how to make a fancy veal dish, which he likens to preaching to the converted. It’s just giving them one more recipe for their portfolio. He finds it far more satisfying to tackle the basics, like teaching people with very little cooking knowledge about all that they can do with boiling water.

His website says Long is in post-production of a provocative food documentary. When will the documentary be out, I ask? He’s not sure, and begins to talk about the challenge of piecing the information together in a way that many people can understand. Then, he tells me about Carl Sagan, the American astronomer who made complex ideas understandable for a wide audience. I leave with no doubt that when his documentary is done it will be understandable — and it will be intense. CG
The death of the family farm is widely bemoaned. Activists ask, “What do we really know about these corporations that produce our food?”

As it turns out, it’s the same question that many farmers are asking themselves, although in a very different context. How can I be sure that my farm corporation is the best design for my farm and my family? Can I really be sure its fine print isn’t hiding a time bomb that we’re going to deeply regret in future?

Canada’s 2011 Census of Agriculture clearly showed that family farm corporations are on the rise at the expense of sole proprietorships. However, the census also found that the trend is linked to gross farm receipts; the higher the receipts, the higher the rate of incorporation.

Many farmers have turned their operations into corporations as the next step in a natural progression that had already seen them evolve from sole proprietorships into partnerships, says Robert Berry, partner in the Miller Thomson law firm at Guelph, Ont.

In the past 25 years too, the rate of incorporation has been hastened by taxes, Berry says. “And transfer driven… but that’s also affected by tax.”

That isn’t to say accountants and succession planners suddenly discovered corporate advantages overnight. Berry says he has been helping a steady stream of clients incorporate for the last 20 years, so it hasn’t really been tied to the boom and bust cycles that come with fluctuating commodity markets.

But there’s no question that there’s been a surge, and these complex business structures have now become commonplace enough to be almost predictable.

“Generally, we’re seeing a transfer of operating assets into corporations, but land and buildings, or at least the main residence and a garage, stay in the name of the original holders of the property,” Berry says. “Since I started 40 years ago, the main issue is still the same; giving up title to the property creates emotional issues and concerns, so they leave the farm property in the name of a parent.”

No one adopts change, especially change which causes “issues” unless there is good reason. In good years, the incorporation trend can be explained by its tax savings. As for the bad years, some speculate that farmers may be looking for a means of limiting liability. But Berry says that although one of the advantages of incorporating is often said to be limiting liability, he sees more reliance on insurance to achieve that goal.

But this brings us to the crux. From Berry’s perspective, it’s accountants who are driving the bus on the corporate trend.

Mona Brown farms and practises law in Carman, Man., and says understanding how corporate farms are run will likely become even more difficult. She’s seeing more farmers willingly adopt very complex business structures, especially young incoming farmers willing to skip sole proprietorship and partnerships entirely.

“The young generation is very, very comfortable with incorporation… it is really smart.”

— Mona Brown

Many farmers have turned their operations into corporations as the next step in a natural progression that had already seen them evolve from sole proprietorships into partnerships, says Robert Berry, partner in the Miller Thomson law firm at Guelph, Ont.

In the past 25 years too, the rate of incorporation has been hastened by taxes, Berry says. “And transfer driven… but that’s also affected by tax.”

That isn’t to say accountants and succession planners suddenly discovered corporate advantages overnight. Berry says he has been helping a steady stream of clients incorporate for the last 20 years, so it hasn’t really been tied to the boom and bust cycles that come with fluctuating commodity markets.

But there’s no question that there’s been a surge, and these complex business structures have now become commonplace enough to be almost predictable.

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“The young generation is very, very comfortable with incorporation, with tax planning, and with paying for tax planning because it is really smart,” says Brown. “I’m not saying the older generation wasn’t, but these farmers are savvier with these mechanisms, and they read more.”

Brown says it’s exciting for her to work with such savvy newcomers who think a little more outside the box. When they come to her, she says she finds the trend is to adopt one of three popular structures.

One of the most common scenarios is to join them with an established farm corporation. Whether it is his family or hers, a family trust is a great way to allocate growth in the company to farm kids looking to take over the corporate family farm.

Continued on page 20
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Continued from page 18

In most of the cases that she sees, Brown says a trust has already been established as part of the original incorporation process. When she builds such a business structure herself, she likes to create a corporate operations company (OpCo) for managing equipment, livestock, and quotas in addition to a corporate land holding company (LandCo) which is only responsible for land.

“We have them as two separate companies, with the shares all owned by the family trust,” Brown explains. “The family trust gives us the ability to get income or capital to other family members without changing the decision-making.”

In other words, those who control the trust, control the corporation, and when it’s time to pass the farm on to the next generation, parents only have to hand over their trust shares.

The next most common structure that Brown sees for passing on the family farm is to set up three companies. One corporation is established for the parents, another one for the children, and then the two corporations work together as a joint venture. “In the joint venture, they combine their equipment and labour, and gradually the parents’ company stops buying and the kids’ company keeps buying.”

Since a privately controlled Canadian Corporation (CCPC) is considered a small business as long as it generates no more than $500,000, this allows large operations to take advantage of small business rules, Brown says.

But unlike having a family trust, there are fewer succession options. “This doesn’t leave us the flexibility the first structure does for using multiple capital gains exemptions,” Brown says. “There’s more in the estate planning side if you have a family trust, but you don’t get three small-business limits.”

Finally, one of the most popular ways she structures incorporations actually reaches back to a more familiar structure in the beginning. Brown says she encourages her young clients by starting first with a spousal partnership. Not only does it act as a two-year trial period, it allows her to sell partnership interests into the corporation rather than actual assets, inventory, and equipment: “so, you get the value out of the company using your capital gains exemption.”

“It works something like two people carrying a shopping bag together,” Brown explains. If you take your grain or equipment out of that shopping bag, you can’t use the capital gains exemption. Instead a husband hands one handle of the shopping bag to the new corporation at 9. A continuation agreement between the corporation and the wife is drawn up, enabling the shopping bag to continue moving forward without the husband. At 10, the wife hands her handle of the shopping bag to the corporation, automatically dissolving the partnership. “Now they have all their assets in the corporation and the value of their handles is owed to them by the company as a shareholder loan.”

Brown says ever since 1985, when the capital gains exemption first came out, this has been a popular choice.

The ability to discuss, compare and deploy such a wide range of strategies is why Brown says she is so encouraged by the upcoming generation of farm owners. Whether they’re taking over the family business or starting out on their own, they are not leery of incorporating when it suits their operation, and they are not afraid to plan well into the future.

As far as Brown is concerned, fortune will favour those who think furthest forward. “Farmers have such ability to succession plan, they have the best rules, it’s amazing. Clients should not have to pay a bunch of capital gains tax,” Brown says. “But if they don’t plan early, they’re likely to pay more tax.”

Meanwhile, Lance Stockbrugger is one of the chartered accountants that Berry says is part of the reason for the growing number of incorporations. Stockbrugger also farms in LeRoy, Sask., and he points as well to recent farm profitability: “Now that we’re seeing more value, there are things we can do to protect that value.”

Part of that value has been realized from agricultural business activities. But not all of it. Increasing off-farm income also has significant impact on most modern farms’ money management strategies.

Corporate farms have an operational advantage in claiming only the annual earnings needed for personal living costs as income, leaving unused value for future business expenses and corporate taxation. Where off-farm income covers all personal expenses, incorporation can appear particularly attractive.

Incorporating also allows for converting taxable income into “active business income” payable to farm corporate shareholders as dividends, and enables the spread of the tax burden to spouses, parents, children over 18, or even non-farming relatives.

Information about farm corporations isn’t exactly easy to find, and at the coffee shop, direct ownership of shares forms the basis of many legendary tales of family fallout, which is why Stockbrugger always recommends a family trust be added where multiple parties are involved.

“You might not ever need a trust. A simple basic share structure might be just fine, but how do you know?” Stockbrugger asks. “The ‘simple’ corporations cost more money in the long run.”

From what he has seen, direct ownership of corporate capital works for some long-established partnerships that are quickly approaching retirement, but Stockbrugger says it’s a mistake to try to save money up front by keeping a corporation simple. A trust that has to be added to an established corporation is 10 times more expensive than paying for one to be built into a corporation at startup.

“If it’s complicated to you, it is probably a good structure,” Stockbrugger says. “The more things you can build into it now, the more it will help in the long term.”
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Life insurance strategies

These five strategies can be serious winners for farm corporations. But be prepared to do some equally serious homework

By Maggie Van Camp, CG Associate Editor

If everything is tied up in fixed assets when a major change happens, even the best-managed farms can stumble and fall. Debts suddenly become unmanageable, family farms get bogged down in the mud of unachievable succession, and estates get devoured by tax liability.

Setting up a rational way to deal with these situations ahead has some upfront costs and requires some serious conversations. However, those costs are nothing compared to the headaches and costs of working out something after a major life change.

Life insurance is one tool to build strategies to solve these problems. “The No. 1 benefit of (life) insurance is liquidity,” says Rob Knight, investment adviser and director at HollisWealth Steward Group in Cambridge, Ont.

At death, life insurance payouts are generally used to cover debt, tax liability, funeral costs, and of course, to support a family. For family farms, life insurance can also be used to equalize inheritance, and if it’s done within a corporation, create a tax-friendly liquid investment.

The premiums are personal expenses, unless the insurance is to cover a loan required by a financial institution as security or if the farm is incorporated. The corporation can pay the premiums for the insurance policy with money earned at the lower corporate tax rate instead of personal income tax rate. At death, the payouts are tax free for the corporation and the proceeds can be moved out tax free through the corporation’s capital dividend account (CDA).

The premiums can be significant and it’s imperative to have a good shareholder’s agreement for your corporation. A shareholder’s agreement helps navigate through death, divorce and disagreement. “It’s much easier to divide something up before you pile it up on the table,” says Knight.

Knight estimates only about half of the incorporated farms he works with have shareholder’s agreements, and of those, only about one-quarter include life insurance to fund them.

That’s partly because whole life insurance is costly. But it’s also because it’s complicated. Finding the right policy for you can be challenging. Generally, the younger the person, the cheaper it is to insure him. Trying to get life insurance once someone is sick or old can be costly or even impossible.

Although there are only five major insurance companies in the country, they have a multitude of policies and values, sold by a myriad of smaller companies. Each insurance company has its own sweet spot at any given time, says Knight. This sweet spot will change from time to time as these companies try to acquire different demographics.

“You should definitely go through an insurance broker,” Knight says.
**Strategy 1: Farm Corporation Buys Insurance**

Basically, there are three parties to an insurance plan; the owner, the beneficiary and the person(s) whose life is insured. The corporation is both the owner and the beneficiary of the policy, and the farmers are the ones insured.

The income tax corporate rate is 16 per cent, compared to top-line personal rate of 46 per cent. So compared to paying for it personally, having the farm corporation pay the premiums can save about 30 per cent of cash flow.

However, those premiums still have to be an amount your corporation can sustain even in bad years. If you need to back out of a policy, it’s really not a good investment. Make sure you can afford the premiums for the duration.

If the plan is to sell or wind up the company in the future, there may be negative tax consequences on a future transfer of a life insurance policy out of the corporation. Also, corporately owned life insurance policies are vulnerable to the corporation’s creditors.

“Insurance rewards patience and consistency,” says Knight.

At death, the corporation is the beneficiary and gets this tax-free insurance payout. Then the money goes out of a notional account, called a capital dividend account (CDA) to the individual as stated in a shareholder’s agreement.

Whole life insurance policies can also be leveraged. Banks will loan up to 90 per cent of a whole life insurance policy’s value, with interest-only payments. Those interest payments for farm expansions or purchases are a tax-deductible expense for your corporation.

**Strategy 2: Expand CDA**

CDA accounts are a channel for money (not just insurance payouts) to come out of a corporation tax-free. “The CDA is a very useful account when you’ve got other corporate capital to liquidate,” says Knight.

One strategy Knight uses to inflate the CDA is to borrow against the insurance policy to buy more insurance. The larger the policy, the bigger the CDA amount allowed.

For example, let’s say you have a $1-million insurance policy and you go to the bank and get a loan (using the policy as collateral) to double the value of the policy to $2 million. At death, the corporation gets $2 million tax free and pays back the debt. The amount left of the insurance payout is at least the original policy value. In the process, the CDA credit has doubled, allowing for $1 million more capital to be taken out of the corporation tax free.

What happens if Canada Revenue Agency changes the rules? Even if it does change the legislation, Knight says CRA has never applied new rules to old dates, so it won’t likely affect already established life insurance policies.

**Strategy 3: Equalize Estates**

Buying insurance on individuals can multiply the value of the investment in order to cover any tax liability or as a way to get money out of the corporation tax free. It’s also an affordable way to equalize inheritance for non-farming heirs.

If there isn’t insurance or other investments, the farm either has to pay siblings out over time, sell other assets, or give land to the rest of the family. For agriculture, land ownership can roll to children or spouse without being taxed.

However, Knight has seen some land inheritance conflicts arise recently with the big increase in land prices. The non-farming siblings want to sell their land for seven, eight or even 10 times the value that it was worth when it was given to them years ago.

You can hardly blame them. However, the increase in prices means the farming sibling can’t afford to buy it, yet it’s needed for their operation.

**Strategy 4: Cover Debt**

If your corporation is in growth mode, you might need insurance to cover debt payments at death or to pay out individuals.

For this, many businesses with shorter horizons will buy term insurance. Knight uses the example of three friends setting up a business which they intend to sell in 10 years. Term insurance is cheaper than whole life or universal insurance for businesses that require life insurance for shorter terms to cover loans or buyouts. “Ten to 15 years is the breaking point,” says Knight.

Multi-generational family farms by their nature are longer-term enterprises, so Knight generally recommends whole or universal life insurance. There’s an upper age limit to term insurance, he explains, and it won’t cover a permanent problem, such as the funding of an estate bequest or tax liability.

“Farms that are growing accumulate debt. Farms that are not growing accumulate capital,” says Knight.

**Strategy 5: Shelter Extra Capital**

“Another reason to buy insurance is to shelter redundant capital,” says Knight. A corporation may have too much capital. Maybe their children don’t want to farm so they don’t expand, or they don’t want to service debt or are nearing retirement.

The return on investment for whole insurance is not as appealing as trading equities, it ties up your money for a long time and only your beneficiaries get the big payout. However, it’s 100 per cent guaranteed and does multiply.

As well, if you’re afraid that your money won’t last to the end of your life, whole life policies can be borrowed against to use while you are alive.

Permanent life insurance can help diversify investments for farmers who want low-risk investments and have a large portion or all of their capital tied up in the farm. If the farm is incorporated, it can be a tax-efficient investment.
It sounds like a dream come true, placing current financial data at the fingertips of everyone involved in the farming enterprise so you can make better, more efficient on-the-spot decisions at critical crunch times. And it might not be a pipe dream any longer.

“It’s just the way the world is working,” says Lance Stockbrugger, a chartered accountant, consultant and farmer cropping 4,000 acres in east-central Saskatchewan. “Having all the required financial data at the fingertips of everyone on the farm who needs it makes capturing better deals and negotiating for grain contracts, parts or equipment easier without the need to always second-guess yourself.”

Just like in the field, however, it’s one thing to have the data. It can be quite another thing to put that data to its best use. And also like in the field, while it’s true the data can make you a better manager, it won’t happen instantly or all on its own.

Stockbrugger, like any other farmer, knows how the “busy work” on the farm can eat into your time, and it’s no surprise to find that bills, receipts and everything else sits day after day in the office waiting to be entered into the system.

That’s the way it used to be — or, in many cases, the way it still is.

Now, farm apps are emerging that enable the capture of data, receipts, bills and so on, at the time the transaction occurs.

FCC’s real-time app is AgExpert Mobile, says Matthew Van Dijk, senior specialist for management software at Farm Credit Canada. “This smartphone app can capture a picture of receipts in real time and sync back to the home or business desktop computer at the push of a button.”

AgExpert Mobile is the travelling companion to FCC’s flagship farm accounting program AgExpert Analyst, a widely adopted program that has been around for 30-plus years.

Some 2,000 farmers are already using AgExpert Mobile, but FCC says it expects that over time, virtually every smartphone owner who uses AgExpert Analyst will become an AgExpert Mobile user too.

This app, and others like it, takes a photo of the receipt or other document. This (a) captures a copy of the document and stores it in the cloud, preventing that all-too-common occurrence of the “lost” receipt, and (b) then with a few taps or swipes allows the information to be marked as an expense or income and to note the supplier, the type and the amount of the transaction.

“At this time, the taxes have to be assigned at the desktop location,” says Van Dijk. “In future, there will be even more functionality added to the app, but for now, if operators use this type of real-time capture of transactional data, they are giving themselves
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a huge advantage in terms of knowing the whole story of their financial data.”

Security is an obvious question when an app transmits confidential data. “The app does the data capture, and at a tap from the user, will send its data to the cloud,” says Van Dijk. “The cloud then transmits or sends the data down to the office computer. There is no transmission of data the other way from the home computer to the app.”

Van Dijk says the risks associated with this type of data collection and transmission is far less than, say, credit card data that might be stored on a company server where it can be hacked, as recently happened with The Home Depot in Canada and the U.S.

Van Dijk also says that FCC does not collect or mine any data stored on the app.

“I’m an accountant so it’s hard to shake off my natural caution toward financial data,” says Stockbrugger. “It is important to put some controls on who can enter the data, who can read it or view it.”

Farmers also need to keep in mind the potential benefits of real-time accounting, Stockbrugger says.

With real-time accounting, buying decisions can be made remotely based on, for instance, the most accurate cost of production. This year’s cost of production can also be compared to previous years. “Maybe it’s just me, but I like as much detail as possible,” says Stockbrugger. “Dollars per unit or per acre, not just dollars.

“I still see far too many farmers trying to figure out a cost of production or other details in the supplier’s office,” Stockbrugger says. “If you don’t know this, you can’t figure out where your profits are, or are not. You can’t make an informed decision about what you should be pre-selling before seeding or at harvest and so on. In order to mitigate risk, this is crucial financial information, and real-time financial management tools make it even easier to have this available even in the busy season — which runs from April through to November in many cases.”

Stockbrugger has embraced cloud storage for other aspects of farm management besides just the financial data. “I have all the farm grain contracts stored in the cloud,” says Stockbrugger. “I can be swathing canola and I can look at my canola contracts and make decisions at that moment based on what I’m seeing in the crop I’m harvesting. I can lock in prices and make other decisions right from my smartphone sitting in the swather.”

Stockbrugger and his brother Lane also log their field operations in real time. “We find keeping spray records and other field operation records invaluable,” says Stockbrugger. “One of us can look at a field, or be in the field with an agronomist, and pull up the data and make determinations and decisions right then and there. Talk about a time saver.”

Embracing real-time financial management means having a smartphone and an app to facilitate data recording and syncing with the home office.

“It’s important to put some controls on who can enter the data, who can read it.”

— Lance Stockbrugger
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The paradox of off-farm income

We all knew off-farm income is reshaping Canada’s farms. But who knew large farms are affected most?

By Gerald Pilger

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada has released its farm income forecast for 2013 and 2014. Not surprisingly, in view of our record grains production in 2013 and rising livestock prices, its 2013 farm income estimates remain at historically high levels.

AAFC pegs average total farm family income in 2013 at $128,517. This is 19 per cent higher than the average total farm household income over the previous five years. And it is expected to keep growing. At the time of the forecast, the department projected farm family income to rise to $132,579 for 2014 despite declining grain prices.

Such figures are even more eye opening when you learn that Statistics Canada put median income for all Canadian households in 2012 at $74,540.

However, there is a wide variability in individual total farm household incomes depending on the size of farm, location of farm and commodities produced. For example, according to Statistics Canada, the net market income for farm families (this is the average farm family income derived from actual commodity sales less any program payments and before adjusting for depreciation or CCA for all farms reporting over $10,000 in sales) ranged from a low of $6,290 per farm family in British Columbia to a high of $22,464 in Quebec in 2011. Prairie farm families averaged roughly $20,000 in market income.

Canadian farm families involved in dairy production received the highest portion of their household income from the market, taking home an average $79,508 in 2011. They were followed by egg producers who received $51,737 from the market, grain and oilseed producers at $32,262, hog producers at $25,081 and beef producers earning only $1,756 from the market in 2011.

Size matters when it comes to income levels. In 2012, David Sparling of Ivey Business Schools wrote Six Years that Changed the Future for Agriculture: Impact on Farm Income in Canada 2005-2010. By using Statistics Canada data, Sparling categorized farms by sales volume. The 66,000 farmers who had between $10,000 and $100,000 in sales revenue actually had a negative net income of $-0.3 billion in 2011 (a loss of over $5,000 per farm). At the other end of the scale, the 2,425 farmers with over $2,500,000 in sales earned $1.2 billion in net income (almost $50,000 per farm).

Sparling is quick to point out: “the 10,000 farms in Canada with more than $1,000,000 in annual sales now account for over 50 per cent of sales.”

However, a closer examination of the variability of net farm income reveals that even the biggest farmers, those farmers producing the highest-value commodity, and farmers living in the provinces with the highest net farm income never even came close to the average farm family household income that Statistics Canada has reported for 2011 and what is predicted for 2013-14.

OFF-FARM INCOME

A fundamental shift is taking place, says David Freshwater, ag economist at University of Kentucky who writes, “Off-farm income has become a major determinant of farm operators’ and farm families’
economic well-being. For a majority of farm families and operators in OECD countries, off-farm or non-farm occupations have become a significant source of income and a major determinant of their well-being."

Freshwater collaborated on the 2011 research paper “Farm Income Variability and Off-Farm Diversification in Canadian Agriculture.” Data presented in the paper shows off-farm income grew from 55 per cent of Canadian farmers’ income in 2002 to 62 per cent by 2006.

Even more interesting, since 2006 and in spite of much higher commodity prices, the percentage of farm household income that comes from off-farm sources continues to go up.

Many other researchers have also reported the importance of off-farm income. In planning the 2008 U.S. Farm Bill, the USDA study of farm family income found that in 2004 off-farm income accounted for 24 per cent of the household income for the largest eight per cent of U.S. farms (those with sales of over $250,000). The study also stated: “Almost 90 per cent of farm household income comes from off-farm sources.”

The March 2009 issue of Statistics Canada’s Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin reveals a corresponding trend. “In 2006,” it says, “the share of operators of small census farms reporting off-farm (income) has remained stable while that of operators of larger census farms has further increased.”

The September 2013 information bulletin of the USDA Economic Research Service entitled “The Off-Farm Occupations of U.S. Farm Operators and Their Spouses” found 91 per cent of farm households had at least one family member working at an off-farm job. The paper states: “…even households operating larger farms often have substantial non-farm income: in 2011, median off-farm income was $29,250 for households with family farms with $250,000 or more in annual sales.”

Freshwater believes farmers consider and rely on off-farm employment as a risk management strategy. “Agriculture is risky. Most farm families deal with this risk with off-farm income. It is a form of diversification. Farmers used to produce a number of commodities to deal with risk. Today they don’t have to produce 10 different things to deal with risk. Instead they specialize, which reduces the labour needs of a farm. As well, technology and capitalization have resulted in more labour than a farm needs except for short periods of time so farmers are able to diversify by working off farm.”

While many farmers complain at having to work off farm and some look down on neighbours who work off farm, Freshwater does not see off-farm labour as bad. Instead, he sees it as a valuable management strategy to deal with risk and to enable a farm to expand. It also allows farmers to live better.

Where it becomes a problem is when off-farm income is used to run up land values and rental rates.

Sparling agrees that risk management is a reason some farm families supplement their farm operation through off-farm employment. However, he feels most farms are simply too small to be economically viable, and the owner/operator must work off the farm. Small landholders, he says, farm as a lifestyle choice.

However, this does not explain why a significant amount of the household income of even the largest farms comes from off-farm employment. Sparling points out it could be a lack of understanding of what constitutes off-farm income. We do not know if value adding of the commodities a farm produces is included in the farm income or if the increased returns as a result of a farmer value adding are recorded as off-farm income.

Nor do we know if income that a farm receives when the farm business adds a trucking service and hauls grain commercially is being reported as farm income or as off-farm employment.

Could there be other reasons why so many farmers with economically viable farm operations also work off farm? Could it be they are sought after for management or technical skills that are lacking in their community?

Could it be that the farmers have developed business skills to the degree they recognize off-farm opportunities and are increasingly pursuing those opportunities while at the same time managing a viable farm business?

Or could it be farmers simply like the challenge of another job?

We really need more information about what constitutes off-farm income.
t felt like it was going to be different this time. In 2008, when the bull run in grain prices really kicked off, that was the sense that swept through the grain industry. Finally, the world was going to have to ante up and pay farmers a fair price for their products. And keep paying it.

The fundamentals seemed rock solid. Growing demand from emerging economies like China and India was combining with biofuel programs that saw almost half of the U.S. corn crop diverted into ethanol production.

It all came together to push grain prices in a near-vertical trajectory, aided by a series of drought and production problems in major grain-growing regions.

In recent months, however, the bears have roared back, leaving us with a crucial question. How much damage has Canada done to its competitiveness by letting its cost of production swell in order to chase grain prices that are no longer here?

As always, the answer varies widely from farm to farm. But the worry is growing.

Land is more costly, including cash rents. Inputs are pricier too, and most farms are carrying more equipment inventory. Often MUCH more equipment inventory.

Suddenly, the wiggle room is evaporating, and we may be heading back into the old paradigm of tight margins on low-cost farms, and negative margins on many others.

Just outside Winnipeg, near the community of Starbuck, farmer Chuck Fossay knows all too well the reality he and other growers now face. He says the pencilling is tougher but the challenges are famil-

“We could be in for a tough few years,” says Saskatchewan’s Chuck Fossay. But that doesn’t mean there won’t be opportunities too

By Gord Gilmour, CG Associate Editor
iar, and he’s not particularly surprised at the way things have gone.

“Grain markets and prices are cyclical,” Fossay says. “We’re now entering a down period of that cycle.”

On the other side of the Prairies, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (AARD) farm economist and management specialist Dale Kaliel echoes that sentiment.

“It’s Economics 101,” Kaliel says. “Over time, the price of commodities falls.”

That’s not to say prices in actual dollars are always on the decline, but rather that in real, inflation-adjusted terms, commodity prices trend downward over time, with occasional upward blips that last until supply and demand are again reconciled.

This is a reality that hits farmers across the country and around the globe. In southern Ontario Mark Brock, who grows cash crops and raises sheep near the village of Staffa, an hour north of London, reports exactly the same kind of tougher math, both on his family’s operation and all around him.

Brock says, if anything, the trend might even be a bit more pronounced in Ontario, since growers there grow the same rotation as vast swaths of the U.S. — corn and soybeans.

“The stars have aligned for U.S. farmers, and they’ve got a good crop coming off,” Brock says. “We’re seeing supply meeting demand and prices coming down.”

That dovetails with what Ontario ag ministry cost-of-production and business specialist John Molenhuis sees. He cites crop prices as the largest, but not only, factor in the looming squeeze.

“Margins are tighter in 2014 than in the past few years,” Molenhuis agrees.

**LOWER PRICES, HIGHER COSTS**

There’s another uncomfortable piece of math in play here too, however. That’s the fact that if you could go back to the fall of 2006 and offer those growers today’s market prices, they’d have jumped at them gladly. Back then, corn futures were flatlining around $2.50, compared to today with medium-term contracts $.80 to $1 north of there, and, at press time, longer-term contracts close to $4.

So in an era of low inflation and even lower interest rates, what’s driven this change?

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In no small part it’s because the cost structure of farming has risen at roughly the same pace as prices, pulled along by an overall commodity boom.

“It does seem that when farmers make a bit more money, the people who produce the inputs want their share of the pie,” Fossay says.

That’s not necessarily the result of cigar-smoking fat cats colluding in boardrooms, however. Frequently it’s the result of simple supply and demand coming home to roost, exacerbated by the nature of how these farm inputs are made. Nitrogen plants and potash mines aren’t cheap to build, and they tend to come online only when new demand sends CEOs a strong price signal.

Think of the Saskatchewan potash industry, for example. Back in the 1970s, as grain boomed, so did the province’s potash sector, with the addition of new production capacity. During the grain bust of the ’80s, ’90s and aughts, however, that sector didn’t add a lot of new capacity, because there wasn’t any economic signal to do so. Why spend a small mountain of money to commission a mine that would immediately begin losing more money? Then when higher grain prices send a signal to farmers to maximize production, a jump in demand leads to a jump in prices and eventually new mines and plants, the process we’re now seeing play out.

Ontario’s Molenhuis calls nitrogen production another of the complex factors that must be figured into any assessment of this situation. There, he says, a further complicating factor is what happened when natural gas prices peaked a few years ago.

“In having a business plan gets you ready to jump on opportunities.”

— Dale Kaliel

“Nitrogen fertilizer production capacity shut down in the U.S.,” Molenhuis says. “Now most of the nitrogen fertilizer is sourced from offshore, and this has made the North American fertilizer market more susceptible to global supply and demand.”

That means benchmark contracts with players like India and China can now affect fertilizer prices in rural Ontario and Saskatchewan like never before.

The process of rising prices hasn’t been linear either, as any farmer who’s puzzled over when to buy the fertilizer for the coming season can tell you.

“Some individual costs see a lot of fluctuation from year to year,” Molenhuis says. “Fuel and fertilizer have been the most volatile in the past six to seven years.”

In other areas, farmers have made their own contribution to the rising cost structure. They’ve certainly spent a few dollars on renewing their machinery line, and some observers say that’s led to a situation where farmers might be overcapacity on the equipment side of the ledger.

Bob Tosh works with the accounting firm Meyers Norris Penny at Saskatoon, where he sees a wide variety of farm financials and has a good sense of the macro trends at play throughout the industry. Over the past few years, he’s noted an increase in equipment size and costs and in overall equipment investment per acre.

Tosh says a number of factors are at play, including higher fuel costs and more challenging weather patterns which drive equipment investment, but the bottom line has boiled down to higher depreciation per acre and, counterintuitively, also rising repair bills on the newer and more complex machines.

“This all worked well when canola was $13 a bushel, but now that it’s less than $10 a bushel, it makes things a little tighter on the bottom line,” Tosh told GUIDE during a recent email exchange.

Then there’s the question of land prices and cash rents, where farmers appear to have bid up the price of both. There’s been a lot of talk of outside investors buying land, but that’s been the headlines, not the majority of the action. Farmers Fossay and Brock say most, if not all, of the land sales in their area have been to local buyers.

“We’ve really seen land prices and cash rents increase a lot over the past few years,” Brock says.

Fossay reported the same in his area, and further noted that despite tighter margins, he’s not expecting them to come down any time soon.

“It takes a single good year to start making rents move upwards, and as much as five bad years before they’ll begin to move down again,” Fossay heard at a recent presentation. “I think we are going to see rents and land prices be a bit sticky.”

**MANAGEMENT TIME**

There’s little doubt a period of belt tightening awaits grain growers across the country. What remains to be seen is exactly what form that takes.

Mark Brock describes a delicate balancing act, where farmers need to find the sweet spot where they’re producing at maximum efficiency and spreading out their fixed costs over as many bushels as possible.

But that won’t necessarily mean squeezing every last possible bushel out of an acre like the past few seasons.

“I think you’ll see that last bit of nitrogen not being applied,” Brock says. “When prices are higher, you can do more things because the reward is there. Say you applied fertilizer in 2012 that you needed three extra bushels to pay for in 2012. In 2015, you’re likely to need seven or eight additional bushels to make it pay.”
Fossay agrees, and says there are a number of ways farmers are likely to tackle this fundamental problem of making the outgo meet the income. Some farmers will actually spend money to make money, he says, seeking to become more efficient and therefore more cost effective.

Others will look hard at marketing and they will shop their grain around more, based on an intimate understanding of their cost of production. Still others will start looking at their rotation and seek new opportunities there.

“We’re seeing more soybeans here in Manitoba, and I expect we’re going to see a lot more,” Fossay says.

The nitrogen-fixing soybeans can save a grower in the neighbourhood of $80 an acre of nitrogen costs over canola, Fossay explains, adding growers in areas not suited to soybeans will likely explore their own options for specialty crops.

“An argument could be made that good times encourage the status quo, while during more challenging times, growers are more willing to experiment and do new things,” Fossay says.

AARD’s Dale Kaliel replies to the question of what farmers could do differently with a question of his own. Where’s your business plan? “From a longer-term perspective, a business plan for your operation should give you better profits and stability.

“The main tenets of good farm management — things like watching your financial ratios and having a plan based on solid budgets and unit production costs — let producers ‘pre-think’ their choices,” Kaliel says. “By doing these things, you will find yourself more disciplined and better able to recognize both opportunities and risks.”

It doesn’t remove the cyclical nature of farm opportunities. But it does make them more definable. “Having a business plan gets you ready to jump on opportunities. It’s easier to make money when times are good. The test of your management is whether or not you can use these good times to get yourself in a financial position to launch when the opportunities that bad times bring present themselves.

“In the end, these are the people I think are going to do the best through this cycle.”

But how long will this cycle last? Fossay knows the effect of millions of farmers around the globe seeking to maximize production and seeking peak efficiency may be to set up a feedback loop of higher production and lower prices.

“If we all go down this road,” Fossay says, “we could be in for a tough few years.”

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When the SPCA comes knocking
Understanding your rights and duties

By Naomi Loewith, lawyer at Lenczner Slaght

Recent media coverage of alleged abuse at Chilliwack Cattle Sales in B.C. has sparked questions about an owner’s obligations when dealing with animal abuse investigators. What are your rights and responsibilities when an investigator arrives at your doorstep?

Inspector powers

Animal cruelty is prohibited under the Criminal Code, which applies across Canada. In practice, most investigations into suspected mistreatment of animals are conducted by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in each province. The SPCA often works with local police forces, but SPCA officers themselves also have police powers.

Although the specific provisions vary by province, some general rules apply across the country. Investigating officers — whether from the SPCA, the police or peace officers — can enter a property where animals are kept during the regular business hours of that operation. The officer does not require a warrant or the consent of the owner. This does not extend to private homes; officers can only enter a private home with a warrant.

Where an owner has reasonable grounds to believe that an animal is in immediate distress and requires urgent intervention to alleviate suffering or preserve life, that officer can enter a premise without a warrant or permission, even outside the regular business hours.

During any lawful inspection, officers can inspect or seize animals, as well as take samples or carcasses. Officers can also order the owner to take steps to relieve animal distress, such as ordering veterinary care at the owner’s expense. In these cases, the officer must provide the owner with written notice of how to appeal the officer’s decision.

In the face of these powers, an owner cannot stop an investigator who attends at his property during regular business hours. Indeed, a refusal to allow access could be used as evidence to obtain a warrant, which can be executed outside regular business hours. Owners should, however, ask to see an investigator’s credentials. In addition, while owners can be required to give documents or evidence to the officer, they are not required to answer questions.

Undercover investigators

From time to time, animal rights activists obtain positions as employees with the intent of taking videos of mistreatment of animals. Unless owners have a specific provision in their employment contract banning filming (which would be a suspicious clause), this type of activity likely does not break any laws. Evidence obtained through these means might be used as the basis for the SPCA to lay charges, or may be used in public relations campaigns that can be hard to control.

In the U.S., a number of states have passed “ag-gag” bills. For example, Idaho prohibits unauthorized recording inside agricultural facilities and Iowa criminalizes providing false information on an employment application with the intent to record images. There has been little enthusiasm for these types of laws in Canada, and industry organizations have generally pushed for openness and transparency, rather than trying to limit access to agricultural facilities. From a public relations perspective, this demonstrates that producers are confident in their livestock practices.

As a middle ground, some states, including Missouri, now require that any evidence of animal abuse be turned over to law enforcement within 24 hours. Animal activists argue that this inhibits their ability to establish patterns of misconduct, but it ensures that the authorities can intervene to protect animal welfare at the earliest opportunity.

Best practices

Producers should ensure that proper procedures are in place for the ethical treatment of animals, and that there is sufficient internal oversight to ensure they are being followed. A common feature of many of the recent scandals has been the professed ignorance of the abuse by management. It is also helpful to have open lines of communication, so employees feel comfortable notifying management of any concerns they have.

When an investigator arrives on your property, it is reasonable to ask for identification, and to accompany the investigator without impeding his access. Owners should also record what the investigator reviewed, and take photographs where there may be a disagreement about the current condition of the animals.

Thank you for this opportunity

This is the final piece in my five-part legal series for Country Guide. I was raised on a dairy farm in southwestern Ontario, and it has been a pleasure applying my legal skills to current issues in the agriculture field. If you have any legal questions in the future, please feel free to contact me at 416-865-2971 or nloewith@litigate.com. CG

Naomi Loewith is a lawyer at Lenczner Slaght in Toronto. As a business litigator, Naomi advocates and manages risks for clients in a variety of sectors, and has experience in actions involving all levels of government.
For the majority of farmers across Canada, 2014 started with a brutal winter and a brutal load of work, with snow to clear and equipment to thaw. Then came falling grain prices, thinning margins, and the race to be on top of absolutely every financial detail.

In other words, if you believe in stress, this has been a tough year for it. But then, if you weren’t already aware, believing in stress is now an option.

The next time a salesperson rolls down the drive, stop them in the laneway and demand a definition of stress. What you’ll probably hear is that stress is when you feel tense, or when you have too much to do in too little time. They may even try to make a quick 1950s joke, like saying stress is when a woman shows up on your doorstep sporting a big ol’ belly.

But these are examples of “distress,” which is when someone chooses to respond to information or events in a negative way.

“In a lot of these farm families, it is Mom who is doing everything,” Erb says. “That’s not OK.”

Pierrette Desrosiers, a psychologist and Country Guide columnist who specializes in working with farmers in St-Herménégilde, Que., says that unless it’s an extreme situation, such as the death of a loved one or winning the lottery, being “stressed” is a choice you make.

“It’s not the stress that makes you stressed, but how you interpret the situation,” Desrosiers explains. “If you feel that the situation is a challenge, and that if it is a challenge, there is a way to find a solution, you will not feel overwhelmed.”

A great example, Desrosiers says, is public speaking. In front of a crowd, your heart rate increases, but as the speaker, you can either think your heart is elevated just because you are so excited, or you can worry instead, thinking that your higher heart rate is a bad sign and it might even mean you’re having a heart attack.

The mind is very powerful in either case, Desrosiers says. “When you feel overwhelmed, and when you feel that there is no hope, that is what makes you stressed... and sick!”

Over the last 15 years, Desrosiers feels she has seen more distress on the farm than ever. She believes a number of factors are contributing to this trend. Debt is high on many farms. There have also been fewer successors, with young people lured to urban jobs which appeared to promise more pay for work that didn’t appear to be so hard.

At the bottom is a general change in expectations, Desrosiers says. “In the past, we had more farmers who found that their work was important, and it was a mission,” she says. “They did not expect to have the big tractors and all the material things that we focus on now. We have been contaminated by external values, and these values are related to anxiety and depression.”

Janet Smith is a Brandon-based program manager for Manitoba Farm and Rural Support Services in Brandon. By her account, western farmers are sharing the same experiences as their eastern counterparts, with the additional stressor of the clogged grain transportation system.

“Farmers who experience high levels of stress for long periods of time can be at greater risk of developing serious physical and mental illnesses if they do not find ways to manage that stress,” Smith agrees. In fact, according to the World Health Organization, farming is among the most stressful occupations. But Smith also points out that successful farmers have had to adapt and find ways to manage the ups and downs in agriculture.

Perhaps there is no greater example on the farm than “the farmer’s wife.”

THE OTHER SIDE

The last census showed that 59 per cent of farm women are now over 50. They also account for over 46 per cent of Canada’s farmers, with women being more likely than men to work off the farm too.

Other studies show that the typical Canadian farm woman is married with children and has a higher level of education than her spouse, but rarely participates in rural women’s networking organizations.

Clearly farm women have a lot on the go, but are they doing too much? And are they hearing more of the farm stress than men? Smith says some studies have found rural women are more likely to either die
Continued from page 35

accidentally (motor vehicle accident, poisoning, and suicide), or from disease (cancer and diabetes), but others show that rural populations, both male and female, rate their health as very good or excellent.

“It’s hard to compare levels of stress, but I would say that female farmers experience stress differently than men,” Smith says. “While farm women wear many hats, and may feel exhausted and burned out as a result, they also have more avenues to deal with the stress they are experiencing.”

While girls are taught to express their feelings, boys are often raised to be “strong and silent,” Smith points out, and this often means women will develop friendships that will support them during difficult times.

Desrosiers echoes Smith’s observations, saying, “Men will express stress differently. They will not say they are stressed, but they will consume more, they will be more upset, and they become workaholics.”

Fortunately, Smith says, she is starting to see a shift in these trends, and she is receiving more calls from men more open to adopting new coping strategies.

Rhonda Erb, a corporate and family professional organizer, believes that she is also seeing more help for women who get into distress trying to be everything to everyone on the farm or in the family.

Speaking last winter to the Canadian Association of Farm Advisors’ Farm Women Managing Farms and Families conference in Guelph, her advice on how to get the whole family working together to reduce stress was to the point. Get everyone organized!

“We don’t think a whole lot about it, but when we’re spending time looking for things, the whole stress level goes up,” says Erb. Having many friends who are farm women, she knows all too well how much paper comes into their houses on account of all the volunteer work they do and all the business documents that are necessary.

Erb says bookwork is a job that often doesn’t become a high priority until tax time, but it’s always important, even before it becomes urgent. Her best advice to women who are balancing farm, family, and community projects from sun-up to sundown, is to keep committed to a day planner and make sure to book time for important things like bookkeeping, but also friends and personal fitness as a means of self-care.

Erb’s other advice is to prioritize and discard. All too often people clutter their lives in all sorts of ways with the unimportant. She urges each farm woman to be honest with themselves and their family about how her time is being spent.

“We have found in the past, there are too many women who are not honestly sharing with their family how they are feeling,” Erb says. “In a lot of these farm families, it is the mom who is doing everything and that’s not OK.”

Erb helps sit everyone down and gets women to share that they are tired, busy, and need help. She says that while some kids — and spouses — won’t immediately volunteer to pitch in, many will.

“Work smarter, not harder,” says Erb. When you do receive help, express your gratitude as well. Not only because it positively reinforces future good behaviour but also, to help eliminate your own distress further.

**PRACTISE GRATITUDE**

Being stressed is a perception. Therefore, it can be altered by a positive attitude. Experts in the relatively new field of positive psychology continue to explore the full impact of a grateful countenance, but have already established that 50 per cent of an individual’s level of happiness is due to genetics, 10 per cent is from environmental factors, and 40 per cent from attitude, beliefs and self-esteem.

Desrosiers insists that exercises which encourage an individual to be grateful will not only help them overcome internal struggles, but also develop positive characteristic traits. She recommends keeping a journal in which only positive statements about what you are thankful for are written, on a daily basis. Or engage in grateful self-talk, including private reflection, meditation, or prayers that acknowledge elements of your life that you are grateful for.

After all, says Desrosiers, as attitudes go, gratitude is the very opposite of distress. CG
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When New Holland vice-president Abe Hughes spoke to a room full of farm media at the company’s North American headquarters in Pennsylvania in July, he wanted to talk about more than the shiny new iron parked outside. It was important, of course, to highlight the innovation in the brand’s 2015 equipment introductions, but Hughes also had another message he wanted to get out: the brand needs dealers.

While that’s something of a surprise, what really got the journalists scribbling was Hughes’ suggestion that big corporate dealership networks need not apply to fill that gap.

Hughes has a vision for the ideal New Holland dealer, and it doesn’t involve a big public corporation run from out of town.

“We’re bucking the trend — and this is really important — I’m not announcing dealer consolidation,” Hughes said. “I know other brands have done that, where they bring dealers together and say, look around the room, look at the dealer to the right, look at the dealer to the left, in five years they’re not going to be here anymore. That’s not what we’re selling. We’re looking to make sure the New Holland brand maintains a strong local presence with independently owned dealer networks.

“We want to have a community link,” Hughes said. “We want to have people who are on the school board, who go to the local church, people who have been involved in the community. We believe this business is best done when there is community engagement and there is trust, honesty and reliability within that community. That’s the New Holland model.”

New Holland’s dealer network must reflect the “authenticity” that’s at the core of the brand, Hughes said. “That’s an important distinction, I would say. That’s the commitment to the local dealership model.”

Having said that, Hughes acknowledged there are already a few NH dealers which are part of relatively extensive networks, and he has no plans to pull the rug out from under them. Most are doing a pretty good job, he believes. It’s just that the giant corporate dealer, which is owned from afar, won’t form the core of the New Holland dealership network of the future.

That puts considerable distance between the blue brand and its sister company Case IH.

From the dealer perspective, however, operating multiple locations is something that many say they must do in order to get the operating scale they need to provide the expertise and resources necessary to support today’s high-tech machines. So don’t think Hughes is ruling out the multi-store model. Far from it.

In fact, flexibility in meeting customer needs is at the heart of Hughes’ dealership vision, and it has even influenced the way he has organized New Holland. As he sees it, different industry segments need different things from a manufacturer and its dealers.

Hughes’ vision is for a New Holland in three segments, he said. “We don’t just go out and do business as one dealer network or as one type of company. We manage it (our business) in segments.

“First we have our main business, which is dairy and livestock. We have about 450 dairy and livestock dealers, and they sell all kinds of equipment around that. Then we have our other business, which is cash crop, where we have our combines and high-horsepower tractors. All of that is our cash crop dealers, and we have about 150 strong. Then we have our pro work tools; these are our compacts (tractors) and our light construction area.

“We’re managing this business completely different, as businesses need to be run these days. We understand our customer, we understand their needs, and then we go from there.

“We know we’re not No. 1, and our aspiration isn’t to be the biggest. In many markets we are, but in North America our aspiration is to be the best at what we do. And that is in particular in hay and forage and in combining in small grains. We made a great entry into the sprayer market. And we are making really good inroads in developing market share for our high-horsepower tractors. Those are the areas where we want to be the best.”

In a way, Hughes’ strategy seems a little reminiscent of Apple’s. The go-its-own-way technology firm developed a loyal following among customers (some might say a fanatic following) by doing just that. Apple users want something a little different. Hughes thinks the blue brand’s customers see things in a similar way.
“We think our customers are a unique bunch of individuals who think a little bit differently, who always want a little bit better out of their equipment,” Hughes said. “They want to be the early adopters on new innovations.

“We want people to have a brand experience with New Holland. It’s not just about the iron. That’s why we’re probably the leading innovators with social media. We’re trying to create an experience around this brand. And that means involving the users.”

In past years Hughes has often said he wants to run his business on integrity, where a handshake means more than a written contract. He reiterated that in July, and he wants dealers who will carry that business philosophy to the showroom floor.

“It’s all about people relationships,” Hughes said. “That’s how we run the business. We think business should still be done on a handshake. Not as corporations to corporations. We think that’s a unique aspect of the way New Holland does business compared to a lot of the others in this day and age. We want to get back to a lot of those short-liner roots with its real relationships, real authenticity.”

Hughes now wants New Holland dealers who share those core values.

“We want the rural entrepreneurs to think about New Holland as a business proposition,” Hughes said.

Hughes has instituted a plan to give those who choose to open up a New Holland store a bit of an edge to broaden sales opportunities. Merging NH North America’s ag and construction divisions has given his retailers the right to sell both ag and light construction machinery.

“We believe that a lot of skid steers and a lot of backhoes are really used in the agriculture markets. A lot of those customers are farmers. And more importantly, a lot of our dealer network is in all of those rural communities. A lot of government and municipality business uses light construction as well. That’s really our whole strategy for pulling all of this together. We’re going to be more present in that municipal business than we have in years.

“There was a time when Ford dominated that business. That Ford backhoe was part and parcel of every municipal community. We want to get back to those days when we have a skid steer, we have a tractor, loader, backhoe and light construction in every municipality. So we (ag and construction) are back together.”

Since beginning his rejuvenation of the brand when he took over North American operations, Hughes has had dealers in mind. Efforts to help them upgrade and carry the brand’s message to customers have been ongoing. This latest announcement works to expand that effort, and there are a few reasons for it.

Hughes wants his dealership plan to not only help reinforce that brand experience for those who walk through retailers’ doors, it also aims to expand the company’s reach into previously under-represented regions. And there is the reality that many existing dealers are getting close to retirement age. They’ll need help transitioning out of the business, which isn’t a problem unique to New Holland.

“(In the past) we really spent a lot of time focusing on our biggest and our best (dealers),” Hughes said. “Now, we have to pull up all the rest, including the ones that need an upgrade. What got us to this is we did a huge consultant study over the last couple of years. We went into the network very deeply and discovered quite a few things that we had to get our heads around. For one, we have an aging dealer force. There are a lot of dealers out there who need a succession plan. So we’re working on figuring out how we transition them, because they’re in need of our help.

“Soon we’ll be coming out with an ad campaign,” said Hughes. “We’re looking to recruit dealers in key places. So expect to see more visibility of us actively recruiting dealers.”

New Holland has given its 996 North American dealers both ag and light construction equipment lines to retail.
Networking and the farm

In the first of two parts, networking expert Donna Messer explains why her work should matter to you

By Madeleine Baerg

If you challenge yourself to describe a farmer in 10 words or less, before you’re halfway through, you’ll find yourself reaching for words like independent, autonomous and self-reliant.

And no wonder. With all the risks and stresses of agriculture, farmers have earned the rights to that image of strength, resiliency and self-determination.

But, as every farmer also knows, it can also go too far, and the way you can tell it has gone too far is that you find yourself thinking that the only person your farm really needs is you.

Today’s farms are big business. To survive in the 21st century farming game, farmers know they need to leverage all of the business skills necessary in any other business.

The harder question is: do farmers always recognize what skills they need to foster in themselves? Do they set a priority, for instance, on getting better at networking?

Networking?!?

Networking is not what you might think (thank goodness!), and if your first response to the concept is “Ugh,” you can bet it’s time for a rethink.

Networking might make you think of assertive strangers, or of aggressive salespeople always pressing for business. You know the kind, always pushing their business cards on you, and droning on and on about the service or product they hope you’ll give in to.

So, as you might say to yourself, why would you want to learn anything about networking? Who wants to start ambushing people on the street or at business events, holding them awkwardly, frustratingly, uncomfortably hostage in the name of furthering your own business?

Not you, that’s for sure. Because that’s the last thing a good networker would do.

Like everything in life, networking can be done the wrong way (the way you’re imagining) or the right way (the way that could make a significant difference to your farm’s bottom line and your farm’s business health).

Networking does need to matter to you, though, because networking is about encouraging others to care about you, your business and what you produce enough so they want to invest even a little time, energy or, yes, money to help you reach your goals.

Though high-calibre connections are valuable, so too are the relationships that encourage small changes: someone believing in your story, choosing your farm over someone else’s for a grain contract, putting in a good word about you with others.

“This is not just agriculture, this is not just farmers. This is about people. It’s about life,” says Donna Messer, president of ConnectUs Canada. “You have to build relationships so you have cheerleaders out there.”

A leading expert in networking, Messer says that whether she is consulting to top-tier financial institutions, boards of trade, major law firms, or even universities and colleges, or whether she is working directly with farmers, her message is the same. The true currency of business is personal relationships. When properly cultivated and leveraged, personal relationships can be put to mutual benefit, even if you produce commodities, not highly differentiated brand goods.

Direct-to-consumer and niche agricultural marketers generally understand that telling their story and building relationships with their consumers are key to customer loyalty and business success. But does that apply to the large majority of agricultural producers who grow commodity products for sale to industrial processors or large-scale distributors?

Absolutely, the experts say. Setting yourself apart always makes a difference.
WHEN THE SHIP SPRINGS A LEAK

“If there are 25 farmers and they all grow the same thing, there will come a time when one of those farmers will stand out. It’ll be about who they know — guaranteed,” says Messer. And if you’re not that guy, it’ll be a tough pill to swallow knowing that he’s making more money than you simply because of who he knows.

Second, you need to be the first to swim if your unsinkable ship ever sinks.

It was in ancient Greece that a philosopher first said: “The only thing constant is change itself.” Given that this adage remains as true today as when Heraclitus said it 2,500 years ago, odds are good that the market you believe is entirely stable, and the customers you believe are totally reliable probably aren’t that stable at all.

And when change happens, your only safe plan is to be prepared.

“What is, will not always be,” says Messer. “Ask, how do I prepare myself?” For instance, if you’re a wheat grower, and you’re in a jam because the local basis is so bad, or because the local elevator has stopped accepting deliveries, who do you know that you can talk to who might know someone who might take on your wheat at a reasonable price?

“The networking how-to

People can be split into three key personality types. Auditory personalities are the life of every party. They are natural networkers who love to work a room. (As you’ve probably guessed, those people probably don’t need this article.)

Kinesthetic personalities make up much of the background hum. These are people who are most comfortable talking one on one, and who prefer an in-depth conversation to a brief and superficial chat.

Finally, visual processors prefer a purpose for conversation and are least likely to be comfortable in a large group setting.

Great networkers understand that the person they are networking with may have a different way of processing the world than they themselves naturally have, and they are able to adjust their conversation style to be more comfortable to the other person.

“People like people who are like themselves. They buy from them, they sell to them,” says Messer.

The solution? First, remember that the world needs all three types, then ask yourself what you could do in order to reach that person in a style that would be comfortable to them. While an auditory personality might need regular contact, a kinesthetic might need a more directed effort, and a visual personality might prefer a solution-based conversation to an emotional exchange.

Second, remember that while your goal is connection, you don’t have to connect exclusively via your product. You are not just a farmer. You might be a parent, a passionate supporter of an art form, a sports junky, a fisherman, a foody, a car lover. Many others in this world share your passions. In fact, you can find commonality with anyone if you seek it. Relationship starts with finding common ground.

IT’S NOT JUST YOU

You aren’t the only person trying to network. In fact, everyone who hopes to be successful in any field needs to actively network. Even more important and more basic, it is human nature to seek commonality and connection with others. Therefore, remember that the people you are attempting to connect with likely want to connect with you too.

“Why don’t you ask me if there’s anything I need? That’s networking.”

“How do you explore opportunities?” asks Messer. “What kind of strategies can make the person you want to talk to want to talk to you? That’s networking.”

Networking is about building real relationships. In fact, networking only works when it is beneficial to both parties. Let that fully sink in. Both parties. That is why in-your-face sales networking does not work.

Rather, networking is about providing relevant and timely information to a party who is not only primed to receive it, but actually wants to receive it.

“I’m not going to try to sell you anything until I know who you are. I’m going to ask you some questions and find out who you are. You’re going to care because I took the time to do something for you. If there are five of us all with the same product, and I took the time to learn about your family, you’re going to choose me because I took the time to care,” says Messer.

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Farmers make this kind of discovery all the time, but for Washington State geology professor, David Montgomery, it was a big lesson about soil when he and his wife moved to a new house in north Seattle some eight years ago. Their new lawn was a sparse and ratty patch of grass trying to thrive in a soil that had been so beaten and abused, it could hardly sustain anything green.

As soils go, this one was essentially dead.

“My wife is a gardener,” Montgomery says. “She wanted to grow a lot of plants in the yard so she started aggressively adding compost and mulching everything to bring the soil back to life.”

Now Montgomery likes to show off a current picture of that soil profile, and it’s astonishing. Sitting on top of that dead zone are two inches of beautiful, dark topsoil.

Building two inches of soil in under a decade is incredibly fast for one of Earth’s more complex geologic processes. Any geologist will tell you that if you grind rock into a powder, mix in some water, and then add billions of organisms, this will make you a fine farming soil.

Except it needs one more thing; time. Sometimes it takes a few thousand years before it’s ready to come out of the oven.

“It got me wondering,” Montgomery says of his backyard experience. “Can we rebuild soil faster than nature does it?”

His wife’s labours suggest the answer is “yes,” which is a good thing. There’s no question that agriculture can be pretty tough on the soil, especially after a century or more.

Civilizations rise on the quality of their soil, and they fall as their soil burns out, and to date, humanity has never been able to get around it.

“A fundamental condition for sustaining a civilization is sustaining the soil,” Montgomery agrees. “Archaeological studies show that soil erosion played a role in the demise of many cultures around the world including the ancient civilizations in Neolithic bronze age Europe and classical Greece.”

North America suffered a major scare during the dust bowl of the 1930s when searing drought, high winds and the farming techniques of the times combined for a major topsoil blowout. But we learned fast and over the next several decades we lessened and eliminated tillage, we bred crops that were better suited to certain geographies and we developed a panoply of chemistries that made crop production efficient and profitable.

We also know a lot more about soil now. The earliest farmers looked upon soil as a deity to be worshipped, and it wasn’t until the Renaissance that we started to look at soil as a decipherable mystery.

Leonardo da Vinci observed that we know more about the movement of celestial bodies than the soil underfoot. Unlike the cosmos, where the motion of the stars is right there in front of you, the soil remains dark and covered, its secrets observable only if we pull it apart, figure out how the different components work, and then put them back together to see how they work as a complete system.

As we learned more about soil we found that it’s more than a substrate in which plants grow. Soil is both living and dead, with mineral particles providing space and nutrients to a teeming world of living organisms from bacteria to earthworms, from several species of fungi to a variety of digging mammals. In its natural state, soil is a living system, powered by solar energy delivered as carbohydrates by the plants growing in it. Soil is the ultimate recycling mill where entire casts of organisms go to work on dead tissue, feeding on it, breaking it up and then recombining it into a catalogue of nutrients for plants, animals and microbes.

“The work that’s gone on in terms of symbioses between microbes, bacteria and fungi living in the soil and nutrient transfer into plants in the last couple of decades has been amazing,” Montgomery says. “It’s changing the way we think about soil fertility and how we actually understand soil ecology. It leads me to think that soil ecology is actually the frontier and future of agriculture.”

If Montgomery’s wife can revitalize her lawn by incorporating organic matter and kick-starting the soil biota, can we do the same with farming? Can we use our greater understanding of soil science and put soil organisms to work mineralizing nutrients for crops and can we use crop rotations to put roots in the ground to energize the living soil? In short, can we both grow crops and build up soil organic matter?

The answer is an unqualified maybe, but a good
Starting point is to look at natural grassland soils and how they work.

“I think that natural systems are a very good reference for us although we have to be cautious about how we interpret those systems,” says University of Manitoba soil scientist Don Flaten. “Some of our long-term efforts have been driven toward natural systems agriculture and how to employ sound ecological principles to try to mimic the success of natural ecosystems wherever possible.”

The old grasslands of the North American Great Plains were vast expanses of mixed stands of different species, most of them perennials. The soil had a blanket of decaying litter and living plants whose roots drilled down into the mineral substrate, opening pores and channels into which water permeated. Soil organisms cycled nutrients through an enormous barter system by which they provided nutrients to the plants while the plants provided photosynthetic energy to the soil organisms. The soil was dark and rich in organic matter. Above ground this fed the wandering grazers like bison and elk that, in turn, fed an ecosystem of predators and recycled nutrients back into the soil.

Our agricultural fields work differently. They’re monocultural carpets of annual colonizers dependent on soil disturbance to provide them with their ideal habitat. They tend to leave regular patches of open soil. They don’t root deeply, and they use most of their photosynthetic energy to produce seeds. It’s a greatly simplified world and the underground ecosystems reflect that simplicity. They’re less diverse and, although it’s a very productive system in terms of our food and fibre, it’s a less stable system, susceptible to soil erosion, rapid nutrient loss and the loss of organic matter.

“In the late 20th Century about a third of the carbon that’s been added to the atmosphere didn’t come out of a smokestack or a tailpipe,” Montgomery says. “It came out of the soil from degraded soil organic matter and, if that much carbon came out of the world’s soils, you could make a pretty good argument that you could put it back.”

What Montgomery is suggesting is nothing short of global soil restoration, bringing back the rich grassland soils and conserving nutrients while still maintaining the productivity of the modern farm. It’s a steep order, the ultimate example of thinking globally and acting locally.

There are precedents though. Conservation tillage and zero tillage, methods of soil conservation that keep roots in the ground and soil protecting stubble on the post-harvest fields are now common practices.

Humanity has tried every technology and philosophy, but will we ever get good at making new soil?

Continued on page 44
They’re also important steps in what we’re now calling conservation agriculture: minimizing mechanical disturbance of the soil and protecting the soil with a permanent cover of organic material and running rotations of at least two crops. We’ve seen damaged soil rebounding as a consequence of low tillage. Are there other things that we could do?

“There’s a whole bunch of things we need to do,” says University of Manitoba soil ecologist Mario Tenuta. “One is the proper nutrition of crops with synthetic fertilizers or organic products such as manures. You can increase the organic matter in soil by growing crops with more biomass or residues returned to soil, and that would build organic matter levels.”

If possible, farmers could rotate to perennials, an old pre-Green Revolution trick that worked well to stabilize the ground and pump organic nitrogen into the soil. Under ideal conditions, the grazers could eat the forage where it stands, saving the farmer the time and cost of baling as well as transporting the forage. The animals do it for you. Additionally, many of the nutrients are cycled back into the soil in much the same way that the old grassland and ruminant ecosystems worked.

“If they’re grazing, the phosphorus cycle is pretty tight,” Tenuta says. “Animals just excrete and the phosphorus is still there. The phosphorus the animal puts in the bone and the meat only amounts to a few pounds coming off the field every year and compared to cropping, it’s a much lower removal.”

Tenuta mentions other benefits such as breaking certain plant disease cycles and increasing rotational diversity. Plus, if it’s a perennial legume, there’s the added nitrogen and a buildup of carbon in the soil.

There’s another way to get carbon back in the ground and it’s a method that was used by the people of the Amazon Basin on the Terra Preta soils before the Europeans arrived. They produced charcoal by burning their organic trash in a low-oxygen environment, and they worked the charcoal into their soils.

“That way you can sequester carbon in a form that doesn’t decompose very fast and you get energy out of the combustion process at the same time,” Montgomery says. “In other words you can generate a carbon negative energy source that will actually build organic carbon in the soil. It’s another piece in the tool kit not only for addressing climate change but for restoring fertility to some of the world’s degraded soils.”

Although putting carbon back in the soil sounds simple, rejuvenating a complex system on a field-by-field basis is very complicated. Tenuta points out that any soil system, even the natural ones, still have a net movement of nutrients downhill and into the oceans. If we’re really serious about soil conservation then we, as a society, have to come up with ways to recapture nutrients from sewage and recycle them back to the farm.

“The nutrients we remove end up going to human food or they’re going to end up going to animal food,” Tenuta says. “Now the excretion products of those animals or those humans need to go back to the land, particularly for phosphorus.”

It’s a very large problem and no one thinks there are simple solutions. At the regional level, both farmers and soil scientists will agree that these things are dependent on local conditions. It depends on what type of operation a farmer runs, where it’s located, the weather and soil type. Flaten reminds us that there’s a tremendous amount of variation.

“It may be within one field,” Flaten explains. “If you have a more rolling topography, a pothole there may be wetter than any part of the Red River Valley and a hilltop may be drier than Medicine Hat. This variability occurs at a variety of different scales, from the regional scale down to the metre scale within a field. That’s why we just have to be very cautious about making broad generalizations.”

But he concedes that we really need to care about soil conservation and we need to embrace the ethic of conservation and adopt beneficial practices that farmers know will work on their land. We need to encourage, enable and reward people who employ the soil conservation ethic.

Montgomery says that it’s not just up to farmers. “I’m really impressed that conservation agriculture is essentially driven from farmers up, but it should be supported at all levels. Governments worldwide should be supporting adoption of these methods aggressively,” Montgomery says. “It really is one of the most fundamental things that humanity needs to do over the next 100 years. We’ve got to get it right.”

The whole country may benefit, David Montgomery says, but farmers must lead the campaign.
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Canada Western Red Spring (CWRS) is regarded as a high-quality product, renowned for its high protein content and good milling characteristics. Likewise, Canada Western Red Winter (CWRW) is sought after for its high milling yields and flour colour. They are similar visually, yet are two distinct classes used for different end products. As such, those who are tempted to blend in winter wheat with their spring wheat risk harming the consistency and reputation of the Canadian wheat that customers count on.

Lisa Nemeth, technical specialist in winter wheat at Cigi (Canadian International Grains Institute), says that both CWRS and CWRW have desirable qualities but have different properties making them typically suitable for different end-product applications.

Where CWRS is commonly used to make products like high-volume pan breads, CWRW is more often used in products like crackers or baguettes.

“In something like crackers, you need extensibility to be able to sheet the dough really thin, so CWRW’s lower protein and gluten strength compared to CWRS makes it better for those types of products,” says Nemeth.

Nemeth stresses that CWRW is a desirable class on its own and can also be used in blends with CWRS to produce an excellent product such as pan bread. The adverse effect only results when such a blend is undisclosed to the customer.

“It’s the difference in the properties between CWRS and CWRW that makes undisclosed blending really hard for customers to manage,” says Nemeth. “We need a consistent product, and we need to give them what they’re expecting. With even 10 per cent CWRW in CWRS, you’re going to change the baking properties of the flour.”

Rex Newkirk, Cigi vice-president of research and innovation, says that one of the biggest differences between the two classes is water absorption. CWRS has higher water absorption capabilities than CWRW, which is one of the main reasons that mixing the classes can cause major problems for customers.

“CWRS is a premium bread-baking, high-protein, very consistent product, but it’s also known for high water absorption,” says Newkirk. “That’s one of its selling features. CWRS will normally be able to hold about 64 per cent water before the dough gets sticky, whereas winter wheat is about 54 or 55 per cent.”

This is a big enough difference to disrupt a high-speed bakery working with CWRS, Newkirk says. The unexpected inclusion of CWRW can cause problems with dough stickiness, strength, and sheeting.

“The reputation and value of CWRS and CWRW is reliant upon consistency of quality within each class,” Nemeth says. “This consistency has been achieved by building a known quality profile for each class. It’s in the best interest of industry to maintain the reputation and quality of Canadian wheat by not mixing classes.”

The addition of CWRW to CWRS can result in an undesirable sticky dough.

Lisa Nemeth, Cigi’s new technical specialist in winter wheat, says the integrity of wheat classes is best maintained by not mixing them.
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The neonic choice

Evidence in support of neonics is impressive, if you take the time to understand it

By Gord Leathers

Another summer is over, another harvest is done and now the key decisions are starting to loom for next year’s crop. The canola page in the seed catalogue is open, but whether the varieties on display are OPs or hybrids, herbicide tolerant, Argentine or Polish, most of them will come with a seed coating containing an insecticide to ward off the flea beetles. Since the banning of lindane, the compound of choice is a neonicotinoid, a water-soluble systemic that makes the emerging plant poisonous to the beetles.

“The neonics are a class of insecticide introduced commercially in the early ’90s,” explains Cynthia Scott-Dupree, environmental scientist and chair of sustainable agriculture at the University of Guelph. “They can be used as foliar applications, in furrow, all sorts of different ways but the most important characteristic of the neonics is they’re water soluble so they can be systemic. This allows us to use them as seed treatments.”

This systemic capability is the strength of the neonicotinoid compounds. Canola’s principle pest, the tiny flea beetle, emerges from the ground in late April to early May, attacking the canola plants as they emerge and when the seedlings are especially vulnerable. This is when you really need the seed treatment.

“They’re excellent for insect pests that hit the crop early in its development,” Scott-Dupree says. “If the chemical exists in the plant, then it really reduces the potential impact at a very vulnerable point in the plant’s growth period, and that’s why they’re so valuable.”

Data from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada bear this out. According to these findings, seed treatments reduced flea beetle damage anywhere from nine to 64 per cent when compared to untreated checks. The reduction in damage improved the crucial stand establishment from two to 75 per cent, plant weight from 100 to 900 per cent and overall yield anywhere from three to 100 per cent. Canola farmers really like those numbers so they’re ready to pay the few extra dollars for treated seed.

“Before neonics, the available seed treatment options for canola were things like Lindane, and it was a granular formulation,” says honeybee entomologist Rob Currie at the University of Manitoba. “The problem with that one is that some birds like burrowing owls would go and pick that up and it was toxic to them.”

Lindane, an organochlorine, was fairly persistent in the environment, it was carcinogenic, and 12 to 20 per cent of it would volatilize into the atmosphere to be carried somewhere else. In 2009 an international ban was imposed on Lindane, and its use in agriculture was discontinued. The neonicotinoids were there to take up the slack and, in many ways, they were better suited to the task.

“They attack nicotinoid receptors, and those same sort of receptors are unsusceptible in mammals even where neonics have been banned, bee populations are still in trouble.
and most other organisms,” Currie says. “They’re thought to be fairly safe for most non-target species, but really toxic to insects.”

“Another reason they’re considered safer when compared to older chemistries is because they retain their efficacy at smaller doses,” Scott-Dupree says. “When we talk of some of the older chemistries like the organophosphates you’re talking about applying pounds of product per hectare, but with the neonics, you’re talking about grams of product per hectare. They’re greener in that sense.”

The neonicotinoid insecticides are not without their detractors, and news of European bans, reports of bee killings and lawsuits by various industry and environmental groups have galvanized public opinion against them. Incidents in Germany and Ontario produced honeybee body counts, and the culprit in both cases was neonicotinoid seed treatments. Neonicots have been fingered as a factor in colony collapse disorder, which involves the loss of entire hives due to unexplained behaviour.

It’s perfectly true that bees, as card-carrying members of class Insecta, die when exposed to toxic levels of an insecticide. It’s perfectly reasonable to assume too that the lab studies performed on bees exposed to nicotinoids are true, and that these levels can threaten pollinators and the beekeeping industry. Based on these studies and the public opposition to their use, many European governments have enacted bans on neonicotinoids, and there’s pressure to do that here as well.

“If you go back and look at some of the studies, they’re exposing the bees to extremely high rates of neonics to determine the levels of toxicity,” Scott-Dupree says. “So a lot of the media hoopla is based initially on the laboratory studies to see if they do get an effect. If they don’t get an effect it could be that they’re not using the right experimental protocol and their study isn’t working.”

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THE SCIENCE

HERE'S HOW NEONICS WORK

Neonicotinoids, like many of our insecticides, are neurotoxins that go after the central nervous system. We often refer to the nervous system as an organism's wiring, but its workings are a lot more complicated because all physiological actions must take place at low temperatures that won't damage the surrounding proteins. Any electrician will tell you that continuous wiring doesn't always do that for you.

The wiring from the brain to the muscles is made up of transmitter cells that we call neurons placed end to end in a series; they're not directly connected to each other. Each neuron ends with a structure called an arbor (from the Latin arbor meaning “tree” because it looks like tree branches) which intermeshes with the next cell through a receptor called a dendrite (from the Greek dendrites meaning “tree” because it looks like tree branches. In this way biology avoids confusion).

The impulse reaches the end of the neuron where there's actually a tiny gap called a synapse between the transmitter and receptor. The charge isn't strong enough to jump the gap so the tips (referred to as the pre synaptic axons) actually produce a compound called acetylcholine, and it's a wave of this stuff that gets pushed across that gap.

On the other side, the receptors on the tips of the dendrites (the post synaptic axons) have a series of protein gates, and the acetylcholine binds with them — almost like a key inserting into a lock — and this opens up a series of small channels into the next neuron. When these channels open, a whole collection of sodium ions (one-half of the formula for sodium chloride, which you would know as table salt) that hang around the gap then move into the cell and fire up the positive charge that moves the impulse down the next cell. When the cleanup enzyme, acetylcholinesterase slips in to remove the key, it doesn't actually recognize the neonic and leaves it alone. The key stays in, the ion channel won't close, and the cell becomes, in the words of a neuroscientist “overstimulated.” What this leads to is a huge number of nerve cells firing in a completely unco-ordinated hodgepodge, so the insect goes into severe convulsions, burns out and dies.

The lab studies are the first step in a longer process. This is where we determine the actual levels of a toxin required to kill the bees, because the first rule of toxicology is that it’s the dose that makes the poison. For example, analysis of apples shows that they contain cyanide, which is a deadly poison that will kill you if you get a big enough dose of it. In fact, the natural world is rife with different toxins, poisons and venoms which most of us survive because the concentrations are so low that our bodies can filter and metabolize them with no ill effect.

This isn't good enough for some critics, and just the knowledge that there's cyanide in apples might be enough for some people to swear off them, even if one a day keeps the doctor away.

This phenomenon is called intuitive toxicology, and it's made worse by hyper-accurate analysis that can detect microscopic concentrations of any compound. Still, the real question is, will the concentrations in the field be high enough to cause trouble with the bees?

“I've done three or four field studies on this now and, although you find residues in the nectar and pollen, the levels are extremely low, way below the level where there is any observable effect,” Scott-Dupree says. “There are residues there, but you have to make sure the dose is there to cause the problem, and you have to make sure that the route of exposure exists so the bee can come in contact with the toxin.”

And that's the story with the bee kills in Germany and Ontario, where the source of the toxin was treated corn seed. Corn is a species of grass so it doesn't need an insect pollinator. Additionally, studies by Scott-Dupree and Chris Cutler showed that bees, in this case bumblebees, don't forage in corn for the pollen.

“We put the bumblebees out when pollen shed started in both conventional and organic crops, and in both situations, bees didn't forage on the corn pollen,” Scott-Dupree says. “In three out of eight fields they did forage for corn pollen but the highest amount collected was not more than 3.6 per cent. Most of them foraged on bittersweet nightshade, a common weedy plant found in hedges rows all over the place.”

In Ontario and Germany, the actual route of exposure was not the pollen but...
the seed itself under unusual circumstances. The conditions were dry, windy and warm, and the bees were foraging in adjacent fields. The pneumatic seeders would jostle the seeds around in the pipes, which knocked some of the insecticide coating off. This was blown into the dry soil and produced a toxic dust cloud that drifted into the bees’ range and killed large numbers of them.

“It’s a completely different issue, a different route of exposure,” Scott-Dupree says, who adds “They’re doing a lot of work on mitigating that by using new fluency lubricants and add-ons to the seed drills to prevent dust from flying up into the air.”

Still, in light of the corn seeding incident, there is talk of tightening the rules regarding neonic application so producers may be required to prove that they need them before they’re allowed to use them. Considering the principles of Integrated Pest Management, where you use pesticides as needed rather than as insurance, this may sound perfectly reasonable. However, it may not work with a seed treatment aimed at early-season infesters, or with root pests that are almost impossible to scout and spray for.

“They have to order their treated seed in the fall the year before they plant, and there’s really no way a grower can tell this fall what the pest pressure is going to be next year,” Scott-Dupree says. “So most of them will use the seed treatment, which is relatively low cost in terms of input costs per hectare. They’ll use it as insurance.”

Although it’s unlikely that we’ll see an outright ban on neonicotinoids in Canada, the European Union imposed a two-year restriction on them in 2013. Eight nations opposed the ban, claiming the science was incomplete.

“They’re still having some problems with bees, even though that product has been banned, so clearly that’s not all of the issues associated with bee deaths,” Currie says. “I think a lot of the problems they’re having with bees are related to things like parasitic mites, viruses and other pathogens, so to put all the blame on that particular insecticide is a bit unfair.”

“Some people think I’m pro neonics but I’m really pro seed treatment. I think they’re an excellent method of applying an insecticide. It’s very targeted and it’s much more beneficial than using a foliar application from a plane,” Scott-Dupree says. “It’s also good for the land, because the less you run back and forth over the soil and compacting it, the better for the environment.”

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Just 20 years ago, virtually every acre of Western Canada was swathed before it ever saw a combine. But then a few things started to fall into place — mainly cheaper off-patent glyphosate — that meant farmers could stop the growth of their crops and get them to dry them down more quickly and uniformly. Soon the sight of straight combining cereal crops became more and more common, to the point where today, it has taken over a significant chunk of the harvest.

But not in canola, the region’s most economically significant crop. In canola, the plant’s design works against straight cutting. In particular, the pods can be easily shattered and their seeds spilled out, making growers nervous about adopting any system that would see plants left to mature and dry while standing.

Some growers have seen success with the system. A 2009 survey by the Canola Council of Canada showed 14.6 per cent of growers were straight combining at least some of their canola, and 13.8 per cent of those surveyed said they’d like to do more. Even so, recent estimates suggest those numbers have moved only slightly, with most surveys saying the number is still below 15 per cent of harvested acres.

But nobody seems to have given up on the system completely. The benefits of further streamlining operations during a busy and stressful part of the season simply make too much operational and economic sense. So the research continues.

Some of the most recent research is actually quite promising, including a University of Saskatchewan study that found canola harvest losses were approximately 10 per cent, regardless of whether the crop was swathed or straight cut, suggesting that swathing has risks, but those risks are simply different, not greater than, the risks associated with swathing canola.

COUNTRY GUIDE was fortunate enough to get one of the region’s leading straight-cut canola researchers to take a break from harvesting his research trials at the Indian Head Agricultural Research Foundation site, just east of Regina on the Trans-Canada Highway. Chris Holzapfel, the organization’s research manager, says over time the two systems can provide similar results, but there is the potential for losses under either.

“If you look at the big picture, both systems work well, and I would expect similar yields between the two over time,” Holzapfel said. “Swathing tended to be a bit better in years where harvest was delayed or frequent rains or heavy winds were encountered during the most vulnerable crop stage, when it’s ready to combine. In contrast, straight combining sometimes produced higher yields. I can only really attribute this to larger seed size, which is also a function of timing of swathing.”

When canola is swathed at the optimal time — no earlier than about 60 per cent seed colour change — the seed size result can actually be similar. However, Holzapfel says there’s little doubt that’s a very narrow window for covering a lot of ground in a hurry, meaning the actual results out in the field are frequently less than optimal.

“It can be very difficult for growers to cover all of their acres at the optimal time,” Holzapfel agreed.

This leads to perhaps his most important recommendation for growers pondering trying out straight cutting canola. Begin incrementally, Holzapfel advises. Don’t ratchet your risks by shifting too fast.
“Growers need to find the balance between swathing and straight combining that works for them.” — Chris Holzapfel

“Growers need to find the balance between swathing and straight combining that works for them,” Holzapfel said. “If they’re new to straight combining, I always recommend starting with limited acres first to gain confidence and experience.”

Some of the larger growers with the most experience straight combining seem to have found such a balance, Holzapfel said. Taking great care to maximize seed size by not starting too early, they swath where they can. When the crop gets too advanced, they then stop and leave their remaining canola for straight cut.

Most growers use either glyphosate or a desiccant to halt crop growth and begin the drying-down process. Holzapfel stresses that it’s important to remember glyphosate is not a desiccant, and it obviously will only work on Liberty Link and Clearfield canola, not Roundup Ready varieties.

A key area of risk is harvest timing, something Holzapfel has examined in his research. They first combined as near as possible to optimal timing, then delayed harvest two to four weeks, measuring pod shatter under each scenario. Holzapfel says “not surprisingly” these tests showed higher losses with delayed harvest.

“If you can be right on top of it, losses will almost always be minor, but when weather gets bad and things get delayed, the risk increases,” Holzapfel said.

All this has led to a search for better techniques and technology to minimize these risks. One is an array of commercial pod sealants that are applied to the crop at roughly the 40 per cent colour change stage, when the pods are still pliable. The coatings will prevent shattering during combining, but so far the results have been inconclusive, Holzapfel said. When losses are low due to a good harvest, no benefit is seen, and when it’s a real train wreck, nothing seems to help.

“We seemed to get the best results when yield losses due to shattering occurred, but were not too extreme,” Holzapfel said. “With a delayed harvest, pod drop accounts for a large percentage of total seed losses and pod sealants are not designed to protect against pod drop, which may be another reason for the inconsistent results.”

There’s also a lot of interest in better harvesting equipment, something Holzapfel says research organizations like Wheatland Conservation Area have been tackling. “I do believe that having the right equipment for the job will be an important factor for success.”

One promising technology is a European header extension. There are several brands, all with the same shared design premise, Holzapfel said.

“It positions the knife farther ahead, so that the canola is cut and above the table before coming into contact with the reel and being moved into the throat of the combine,” Holzapfel said.

Several of the newest North American header designs allow operators to adjust the knife position on the go and may offer many of the same benefits.

“They may be well-suited to straight combining canola but still useful for cereal and pulse crops, which was one of the criticisms of the older extensions — that they were only useful for canola,” Holzapfel said.

European research clearly shows a reduction in shattering losses when the knife is positioned as far ahead as possible. IHARF is partnering on a project with other organizations to evaluate different header types, but the 2014 season is the first harvest, so no results are available yet.

A final research area involves looking at varietal differences, but Holzapfel says it’s not as cut and dried as saying which can or cannot be straight combined. “The reality is we have generally been able to successfully straight combine all the cultivars successfully, and the environment and timing of harvest operations are going to be the main factors.”

Holzapfel also noted that new hybrids, such as L140P and 45H32, promise improved tolerance to shattering and pod drop, and may be a significant improvement. However, 2013 was the first season they looked at these new offerings, and it happened to be a season with very low overall shattering pressure, meaning most of the cultivars under examination fared well.

Said Holzapfel: “Overall I think good agronomy, proper timing of operations and perhaps a bit of luck play a bigger role in determining the overall extent of losses in any given year than genetic differences.”

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Fusarium biocontrol expected to hit market in next couple seasons

Noted farm journalist Allan Dawson has reported in our sister publication, the Manitoba Co-operator, that a breakthrough against fusarium head blight may help growers fight fire with fire.

That’s if a new biocontrol makes it to market as hoped in a year or two.

Adjuvants Plus at Kingsville, Ont. has reached a licensing agreement with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) to use its patented technology — a fungal organism called Clonostachys rosea, strain ACM941 — to prevent fusarium head blight in wheat and cereals.

The product has the potential to work on other food crops, company president Bill Brown told Dawson.

Clonostachys rosea ACM941, a fungal microbe isolated from the lower leaf of a field pea plant in Manitoba, infects and kills fusarium and other disease pathogens. It was patented by AAFC scientist Allen Xue in 1999. ACM941, a living product, would be sprayed on wheat before the bloom stage. To protect wheat from fusarium, it must first infect it, but doing so doesn’t hurt the wheat, Brown said.

“It really prevents it (fusarium) getting in. It’s there first. It’s simple site occupation followed by food source denial.”

In some cases the ACM941 will feed on fusarium, Brown said. “It’s kind of like a guard dog — it keeps you against the fence unless it gets hungry.”

The new product will work well in an integrated pest management program, providing farmers with another mode of action for preventing fusarium head blight infections, Brown said.

The product is also expected to be approved for organic use.

Soybean finding bodes well for West

If soybeans do continue to steal acres from canola, it will likely be in part due to a recent discovery at two U.S. universities. Researchers from Purdue University and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln say they have discovered a soybean gene whose mutation affects plant stem growth, a finding that could lead to better seed for northern regions.

At Purdue, agronomy professor, Jianxin Ma and collaborators identified a gene known as Dt2, which causes semi-determinacy in soybean plants.

Soybean cultivars are often divided into two groups: indeterminate — tall plants whose main stem continues to grow after flowering; and determinate — shorter, bushier plants whose main stem halts growth when blossoms begin to form.

Determinate soybean plants thrive in the longer growing season of the south while indeterminate plants with their overlapping vegetative and reproductive stages are better suited to the north. But the height of indeterminate cultivars renders them prone to lodging.

For northern soybean producers, semi-determinate soybean plants could represent a “Goldilocks” cultivar, a “just right” alternative between the two, a Purdue release says.

Class action targets neonic producers

AgCanada.com

Major makers of neonicotinoid pesticides are targets of a proposed $450-million class-action suit by Canadian beekeepers and honey producers.

The suit, spearheaded by London, Ont. law firm Siskinds and lawyer Dimitri Lascaris, names the Canadian branches of Bayer, Bayer’s CropScience and Syngenta, and Bayer and Syngenta’s parent firms in Germany and Switzerland as defendants on behalf of two representative plaintiffs, Sun Parlor Honey and Munro Honey.

The statement of claim, made in an Ontario court, alleges the products were marketed in a way that rendered them “ubiquitous and inescapable for bees,” and that the products were not adequately tested in a way that “fully disclose the magnitude of their risks” to bee populations, among other claims.

The statement of claim also calls for the Ontario court to certify the suit as a class action.

If certified, the suit’s “class” would include all beekeepers who owned or still own honey-producing, pollinating or queen bee-rearing businesses in Canada any time between Jan. 1, 2006 and the class-action certification date.

A certified class action would seek “general and specific” damages of $400 million plus punitive damages of $30 million, the statement of claim said.

Syngenta’s Guelpph office declined to comment on the case specifics, but said “we do take concerns about bee health very seriously.”

Evidence, including field studies conducted in Canada, “clearly shows that bees and other pollinators can coexist safely with modern agricultural technologies, including neonicotinoids,” Syngenta said.

Blame game brewing in Latin America over Bt gene failure

The Reuters news service recently reported Brazilian farmers are crying foul after their genetically modified corn seed failed to protect them from insect pests.

These producers want the four major seed companies producing Bt corn seeds to reimburse them for as many as three applications of pesticides this season, said Ricardo Tomczyk, president of the Mato Grosso state farmers’ group Aprosoja.

“The caterpillars should die if they eat the corn, but since they didn’t die this year, producers had to spend on average 120 reais ($54) per hectare... at a time that corn prices are terrible,” he said.

Large-scale farming in the bug-ridden tropics has always been a challenge, and now Brazil’s government is concerned that planting the same crops repeatedly with the same seed technologies has left the agricultural superpower vulnerable to pest outbreaks and dependent on toxic chemicals.

In Brazil, the main corn culprit is Spodoptera frugiperda, also known as the corn leafworm or southern grassworm.

Seed companies say they warned Brazilian farmers to plant part of their cornfields with conventional seeds to prevent bugs from mutating and developing resistance to GMO corn.

Tomczyk said Aprosoja encouraged the planting of refuge areas. But he said the seed companies have not given clear instructions.

“There are barely any non-GMO seeds available... it is very uncomfortable that the companies are blaming the farmers,” he said.
BRITISH COLUMBIA

Oct. 19-25: Look for generally fair weather this week in spite of some shower activity in places. Temperatures lean to the mild side even though frost is common at higher elevations.

Oct. 26-Nov. 1: Highs climb into the double digits at most southern localities with some coastal rain and showers elsewhere. Northern and higher regions get heavier rain or snow and frost.

Nov. 2-8: Often fair but expect a couple of unsettled, windy days with scattered rain in the west, chance heavy days. Frosty nights and windy at times. Occasional snow falls in the north.

Nov. 9-15: Mostly mild in the west with frequent dull, wet and blustery days. Changeable in the Interior with some rain except snow and frost at higher levels. Cooler in the north with some heavier snow.

SASKATCHEWAN

Oct. 19-25: Weather conditions and temperatures fluctuate as fair, dry days are interrupted by wet, cooler days. Frosty nights and windy at times. Occasional snow falls in the north.

Oct. 26-Nov. 1: Seasonal to occasionally mild under windy conditions from time to time. Generally fair in the south with scattered rain. Cooler in the north with intermittent wet snow.

Nov. 2-8: Snow is common on a couple of days this week, chance locally heavy, mixed at times with rain in the south. Otherwise fair with changeable temperatures and occasionally windy.

Nov. 9-15: Unsettled on a few days as colder air advances with blustery northwest winds. Periodic snow, heavy in a few areas on two or three days. Sub-zero lows with a risk of rain in the south.

MANITOBA

Oct. 19-25: Look for variable weather as fair skies alternate with some rain and brisk winds. Mild temperatures interchange with cooler, frosty days. Intermittent snow northern regions.

Oct. 26-Nov. 1: Temperatures vary and at times trend to the mild side. Fair with scattered rain on two or three days in the south. Cooler in the north with occasional wet snow. Windy at times.

Nov. 2-8: Fair with changeable temperatures and blustery winds this week. Snow on a couple of days mixed with rain in the south. A weather system threatens with heavy snow and gusty winds.

Nov. 9-15: Unsettled and changeable weather as colder air moves in from the northwest. Sub-zero lows but highs often above zero in the south. Snow is common in many areas, heavy in places.

October 19 to November 15, 2014

NATIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

Milder and drier-than-usual weather is likely to dominate much of the West in this period despite shorter days and colder outbreaks. A similar mild temperature regime is expected across the Atlantic provinces, although eastern regions are likely to see a few weather systems bring accompanying wet spells from time to time. Elsewhere from Saskatchewan eastward through to Quebec, alternating mild and cold periods should average out with temperatures near normal values. Snow in northern areas will spread southward in October and bring a few heavy snow events to many southern areas of Central Canada in November.

Prepared by meteorologist Larry Romaniuk of Weatherite Services. Forecasts should be 80 per cent accurate for your area; expect variations by a day or two due to changeable speed of weather systems.
Ideas that don’t work

These common workplace tactics don’t work.
The better ideas do

By Pierrette Desrosiers, work psychologist, business coach, and author

Aubrey C. Daniels, one of the world’s foremost authorities on human performance, has developed a list of management tactics that often backfire. Here are some of his losers, plus tips for achieving your team goals in more productive ways.

1. EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

Why it doesn’t work: Often employers focus too much attention on one employee, holding them up as examples. Yet most work is a team effort. When other employees feel underappreciated, they are demotivated.

A better idea: Acknowledge everyone’s achievements as they happen, and emphasize teamwork. Everyone contributes to the farm’s results.

2. STRETCH GOALS

Why it doesn’t work: When you set out goals that are meant to help your employees “stretch” and drive their performance to the next level, employees can instead end up overwhelmed and frustrated. When they fail to reach aggressive goals, they begin to feel that their best is never good enough.

A better idea: Set achievable short-term goals. Ask the team if it is confident it can reach its goals. Chart employee progress month by month instead of once a year.

3. PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

Why it doesn’t work: Annual performance appraisals are hated by both managers and employees. They aren’t even effective motivators because they are only done once per year, and are especially damaging when employees do not have total responsibility for the metrics on which they are assessed.

A better idea: Give immediate feedback for both successes and failures. Coach your employees. Do they lack training, resources or motivation? Are personal issues interfering with their focus? Give appropriate help. Then, if an employee is not suited for their job, make the decision appropriately.

4. RAISES IN SALARY AND AUTOMATIC BONUSES

Why it doesn’t work: A raise is permanent, but it’s unlikely to continue to motivate better performance. Often, bonuses also become seen as entitlements even if performance isn’t satisfactory. If bonuses are triggered by hitting certain targets, and employees cannot entirely control whether or not they hit those targets, failure can build resentment.

A better idea: Pay for performance or share revenue in a way that must be earned each year, but also pay for behaviours that are important in your business and align with company values. Make sure you include perks for effective teamwork.

5. SAYING, ‘YOU DID A GOOD JOB, BUT…’

Why it doesn’t work: Softening criticism with praise is not a motivator. Nor does sandwiching criticism between two positive statements.

A better idea: Praise and criticism should come in separate conversations. Learn to give constructive feedback. Be straightforward.

6. PROMOTING PEOPLE NO ONE LIKES

Why it doesn’t work: Just because a person is the best mechanic doesn’t mean they should be in charge. Good supervisors inspire commitment and loyalty. Promoting someone no one likes can lead employees to underperform or perform out of fear.

A better idea: Promote people who are liked and who have superior interpersonal abilities. Remember, supervisors play a large role in determining work climate and employee motivation.

7. DOWNSIZING

Why it doesn’t work: Between the added workload placed on those who remain, the cost of training new hires after the recovery, and the fear among employees that they might be next, downsizing is a disaster. People feel demotivated, overwhelmed, and abandoned.

A better idea: Find creative ways of cost saving. Be honest with your employees. Ask for their ideas.

8. NOT TAKING CARE OF EMPLOYEE STRESS

Why it doesn’t work: New neuroscience studies demonstrate how stress hurts the brain and substantially impacts individual and team productivity. Stress impacts workplace climate, motivation, and more. It also impairs your ability to make decisions and effectively manage money and time.

A better idea: If you have one and only one competency to improve for yourself and your employees, invest in resources for stress management training.

Pierrette Desrosiers, MPS, CRHA is a work psychologist, professional speaker, coach and author specializing in agriculture. She comes from a family of farmers and she and her husband have farmed for more than 25 years (www.pierrettedesrosiers.com). Contact her at pierrette@pierrettedesrosiers.com.
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Farming better through yoga

Set your skepticism aside. Just check out the science and these benefits of yoga on the farm across the country, yoga is catching on as a way to strengthen muscles, reduce pain and increase energy. “Yoga is good for injuries, work-related soreness and tiredness,” says Kate Stevely, a certified instructor who teaches yoga in Stratford, Ont. and surrounding communities.

It’s enough to make you think yoga should be universally prescribed on the farm. Besides, the image of yoga is changing too, in ways that are also healthy for farmers.

While traditionally nine out of 10 of her yoga students have been women, Stevely says that’s changing. People of all ages and from all walks of life are discovering the benefits of regular yoga practice, she says.

That includes a private class that Stevely teaches to a group of farmers. “I see farmers with bad knees, bad backs and some with both,” says Stevely.

Stevely has seen how yoga can benefit those with injuries. One of the men in her Yoga for Farmers class had back surgery, and after getting approval from his doctor, he started doing yoga during his recuperation, says Stevely. Some 18 months post-surgery, he received a clean bill of health, she says.

Then there’s also a farmer participant who spent a summer completely incapacitated due to a back injury. Since starting yoga he hasn’t experienced any relapses, she says.

Another of Stevely’s classes is a group of golfers, mostly older men. “Yoga helps by loosening the hips and shoulders and minimizing damage caused by always twisting the same way,” she says.

A long-haul truck driver has discovered the benefits of yoga for the low-back pain he was experiencing from so many hours spent driving, says Stevely. When he is home he attends Stevely’s yoga class and when he is on the road he uses a special platform he built so he can do the Legs-up-the-wall yoga pose in the cab of his truck.

Stevely’s understanding of yoga is based on almost 50 years of personal and professional experience. She first discovered yoga after injuring herself in a track and field event at the age of 15. She was told by her osteopath that the only way she could avoid wearing a back brace while she healed was if she did yoga.

Back in the 1960s there weren’t any local yoga classes but Stevely did find one book in the Stratford library. She did the exercises morning and night, and made a full recovery, without the brace.

That was the start of Stevely’s lifelong dedication to yoga. She began studying under instructors in Ontario and the U.S., becoming a registered yoga teacher (RYT) with the Yoga Alliance.

Many people have the misconception that yoga is a religion but it’s not, explains Stevely. Yoga, which originated in ancient India, combines breathing with movement. “It’s that awareness and focus that makes it different from other exercise programs,” she says.

One of the advantages of yoga over other forms of exercise is the focus on how you’re feeling. Traditional yoga moves slowly so you can listen to your body, explains Stevely. “Yoga shouldn’t be competitive. If you push too hard you will end up hurting yourself.

“It’s that focus on what you’re doing that also provides stress relief,” she adds.

Fortunately, today’s yoga classes are much easier to find with many fitness and community recreation centres offering classes.
What to look for in a yoga class

Unfortunately not all yoga classes are equal. To get the most from a class, Stevely offers these suggestions.
• Check out the teacher. Some classes are taught by people with very little experience. When looking for a class, find out what the teacher’s qualifications are, insists Stevely. “Make sure they didn’t just take a weekend workshop to become certified.” Stevely recommends looking for a teacher certified by either a provincial yoga association or the Yoga Alliance. These organizations typically require instructors to have a minimum of 200 hours of training.
• Get approval. If you have an existing medical condition or injury, get your doctor’s approval before signing up.
• Ask questions about the style of yoga being taught. Avoid classes where participants move quickly through the poses, since this can lead to injuries. “While some classes are based on yoga, they have lost the focus on the mind and the breath,” says Stevely.
• Look for small classes. Large classes with 20 or more participants make it difficult for the instructor to help each individual.
• Try it out. Before signing up for a series of classes, try to observe a class or drop in to a class to try it out.
• Commit to doing it. To experience the benefits of yoga, it’s necessary to practise regularly. Ideally you should devote 20 to 30 minutes a day to yoga, but at the very least attending one class with a followup of one session at home is the minimum commitment, says Stevely.
• Start now. You are never too old to begin doing yoga, says Stevely. “One of the benefits of yoga is that it starts where you’re at.” As you get better at it you can challenge yourself more, she adds.

As an example, Stevely tells the story of one student who started yoga at age 69. When she first came to class she was hunched over and was having knee trouble. After a year of attending class twice a week and practising at home, Stevely says her posture improved noticeably and she is walking much better.

Yoga at home

While yoga instructor Kate Stevely recommends attending a class, if you cannot find a way to slot a class into your schedule then she suggests getting a video to do it yourself at home. While there are many videos available, she likes the Rodney Yee series (www.yeeyoga.com) because they range from beginner to advanced. (These can be purchased online and are also available in some department stores.)

Suggested Poses:

Yoga doesn’t have to be complicated. Doing these three simple poses will provide noticeable benefits, says Stevely. As with any exercise program, check with your doctor before trying these poses.

Legs-up-the-wall

This is a restorative pose that relieves lower back pain and boosts circulation.

Sit sideways to the wall with your hip and shoulders touching the wall. Swing legs up and roll over onto back. Rest here or add moving your arms in time with breath to focus mind on the connection between breath and movement and to get your mind tuned into what you are doing. Then bring the knees into the chest and wiggle away from the wall and Roll Side to Side (see below).

Roll Side to Side

This can be done after Legs-up-the-wall or on its own. This is very free-form, spontaneous yoga. Hold on to the hamstrings or shins or toes or let go of the legs. Roll side to side. Or drop the feet to the floor and with knees bent, roll legs side to side, like windshield wipers. Try to use your awareness to find tight spots in shoulders, hips or back and roll them out.

Back Bridge Pose

Start in Constructive Relaxation position (feet flat on floor, knees bent, chin tucked a little, shoulders down away from ears). Then draw navel back toward spine and feel tailbone lift a little. Press down into the feet and let the back follow the tail bone up into a Back Bridge. Then roll down slowly, trying to feel each vertebrae touching down separately. End back in Constructive Relaxation.

Gentle Hamstring and Back Stretch with Easy Twist

Holding a belt or yoga strap in both hands and starting in the Constructive Relaxation position (feet flat on floor, knees bent, chin tucked a little, shoulders down away from ears), bring right foot into strap and push sole of foot up to ceiling. If it’s comfortable, slide left leg out long on the floor. Take the strap in the right hand and let right leg roll out to the side while keeping left hip/pelvis down. Next bring right leg back up, take strap in left hand and take right leg across the body ensuring right shoulder stays grounded into the floor. Draw legs in and hug. End in Constructive Relaxation, rolling knees side to side like windshield wipers. Repeat with the left leg.
Gout isn’t only for the rich and famous

By Marie Berry

You probably think you need to be royalty like King Henry VIII of England to have gout. Not so! About two percent of Canadians have gout, and even that number may be under-reported because gout is often mistaken for other types of joint pain, leading many people to just treat it themselves with a pain reliever.

It is true that more men than women are affected, yet by age 50 this difference disappears.

Gout or gouty arthritis is a type of arthritis, with joint inflammation affecting often the big toe, but also potentially the ankle, foot, knee, hand, wrist, and/or elbow.

The inflammation is caused by deposits of uric acid crystals in the joint. It is thought that these joints are more often affected because they usually are cooler in temperature, which allows for uric acid deposits.

Gout’s association with the rich and famous was historically due to the different diets of rich versus poor people. The wealthier you were, the more likely you were to eat foods that produce uric acid when digested. Today, diets are much more similar regardless of income, meaning gout can affect anyone.

However, some foods do seem to be more strongly implicated in gout. These are foods high in purine which is broken down in your body to uric acid. Such foods include red meats, seafoods, and organ meat such as kidneys and liver.

While your wealth is no longer a risk factor, there are others. Higher alcohol consumption (that is more than one drink per day for women or two for men) seems to be associated with a higher rate of gout.

As well, more people with untreated or poorly controlled high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, or diabetes have gout. A family history of gout and existing osteoarthritis are also considered risk factors. And, some high blood pressure medications and low-dose ASA used for heart health can worsen gout.

Uric acid can be measured with a blood test. In general, with high uric acid your risk for gout increases. However, some people never are affected despite high uric acid levels.

Gout is a condition that flares up from time to time, with symptoms occurring, then diminishing and not recurring until months or even years have passed.

The pain is usually sudden and intense, and seems to occur most often at night. There may as well be joint swelling, redness and tenderness.

For acute attacks of gout, a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug is most often used, for example naproxen, ibuprofen, or diclofenac. Treatment is used until the symptoms have disappeared, usually in five to 10 days.

Sometimes, if the inflammation is severe, a steroid is needed but again only for a short time. Colchicine was at one time used widely, but today its gastrointestinal side-effects such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhea have limited its use.

Your body is also able to manufacture uric acid, and this process may itself be the reason for your higher levels. Allopurinol interrupts a crucial step, inhibiting an enzyme known as xanthine oxidase which is needed for the manufacture of the uric acid.

If you are prone to gout and have more than just occasional attacks, regular daily use of allopurinol may be a good idea. In general it is well tolerated and available in a variety of strengths, although a skin rash allergy is possible.

In the case of gout, making sure that you have a good fluid intake, especially water, is key.

Water helps wash excess uric acid from your body. Just think, if King Henry VIII drank more water and less alcohol along with saying, “No thank you,” to steak and kidney pie, he might not have had those painfully swollen joints!

Marie Berry is a lawyer/pharmacist interested in health and education.
FarmDock is an easy to use mobile app that allows you to plan, assign and track activities on your farm. It’s simple to set up, simple to use and can be quickly customized to fit your operation.

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Last year the Hansons had invited way too many relatives to Thanksgiving dinner. The immediate family had snuck out to the shop to eat pie standing up and get away from the chaos. This year they promised: “Just us.”

So Dale was confused when he ran into Brian Miller at Tim Hortons. After the usual talk about rotten fall weather, never-ending rain, the hassle of a late harvest and the problems Dale was having with his new combine, Brian said, “Hear you’ll need an extra chair at the table this Thanksgiving.”

It took Dale a minute to realize what Brian meant. “Uyp. Dad’s still got that girlfriend from Medicine Hat. She’s coming out for a while before they go back down to Yuma. Assuming we finish harvest before spring.” Dale felt awkward calling Helen his father’s “girlfriend” — the woman was 72 — but he couldn’t think of a better word, and Ed didn’t seem likely to propose soon.

“That’s not what I meant,” Brian said. Dale swelled with pride. “It’s the granddaughter’s first birthday this weekend. Hard to believe how fast they change.”

Brian chuckled, picked up his change and his Timbits and headed for the door. “No idea,” Donna said. “She didn’t say anything about that.”

Dale leafed through the stack of mail he’d brought home and paused to look at a magazine cover. “Article about post-harvest burn-off. Humph. If we ever get to finish harvest we’ll think about that.”

“What?” Donna said. “How did you know Trina was coming home?”

“Brian Miller told me,” Dale said. “Wonder how he’d know.” Dale went back to his magazine, wishing he could get to the field. Donna found something to do in her office, also wishing Dale could get to the field.

Neither of them gave Brian Miller any more thought.

After a month of grey skies and machinery breakdowns, Thanksgiving weekend finally brought sunshine and warm temperatures.

“This is the kind of gorgeous fall weekend everyone imagines when they think of Thanksgiving,” said Ed’s “girlfriend” Helen when she arrived carrying three pumpkin pies.

“We’d feel more like giving thanks if we had the crop in,” Ed said, opening the lid of one of the pie containers.

“You’re just in time, honey,” Donna said when Trina came in with her overnight bag. “But you’re alone. Did your friend change his mind?”

“No, he’s coming,” Trina said, disappearing into the bathroom. “He should be here any minute.”

This left everyone wondering why the boyfriend would drive all the way from Calgary in a separate car, but before anyone could ask, Trina’s brother Jeff stormed in.

“Elaine, can you print those pages from the parts manual off the Internet again? Damn header’s still not working. And look,” he said, gesturing toward the window. “That moron Ryan Jackson’s driving up in his beat-up truck. He sold me the wrong part three times this week. Does the dealership have him delivering wrong parts now? We’ve got enough problems, without that idiot standing around telling us we should farm organic like his dad. Oh, hey Trina,” he said. “Long time no see. Long drive, hey?”

After kicking her older brother in the shins, hard, Trina opened the door and greeted Ryan. She introduced him to Elaine and Helen, and explained that she’d started seeing Ryan in Saskatoon, where they’d both spent the summer. “We grew up less than 30 miles apart, but since we went to different schools, we didn’t know each other very well,” Trina said. “Now he’s back here, working at the machinery dealership and helping on his parents’ farm.”

“Hello Ryan,” Jeff said, shaking hands and then bending down to massage his shin. Elaine stood close by her
Leeann Minogue is the editor of Grainews, a playwright and part of a family grain farm in southeastern Saskatchewan.
The flying bishop

As he celebrates his 20th year as Country Guide columnist, Rod Andrews remembers that he only ever wanted to be an Anglican priest. And a pilot

By Shirley Byers

Rod Andrews knows what it is to be forever connected to a chunk of land and a way of life. There’s a special quality in his voice when he talks about the family farm, on Alberta’s Coal Trail between Delburne and Red Deer.

“It was a magic place. I loved to go there,” Andrews says of the days when his grandparents still lived on the home ground. “On holidays and long weekends my family gravitated to the farm and I would go there on my own for a couple of weeks in the summer. I’d have my own calf and that was where I learned to drive a tractor.”

Farmers faced their share of challenges then as they do now — some similar, some quite different — but there was a strong sense of community and cooperation. The rural telephone line was just one example. Everyone worked together to set up a line in the district, and then everyone was expected to take their turn to help repair it if, and more likely when, need be.

Rod remembers the phone going down and his grandmother, unable to phone her grocery order into town, saying to the men, “Well, it’s raining today, you can’t hay; you can fix the phone.” The men would go out and get the lines going.

“But it had to be a rainy day activity,” Rod chuckles. “Today, if our Internet doesn’t work for half an hour it’s a crisis. Think of what happens when BlackBerry has a blackout...”

Born in Red Deer and raised in the little town of Delburne, Alta., Rod was ordained in the Anglican Church of Canada in 1965 when he was 23. His first posting was to Lethbridge as the assistant priest. He loved his vocation, as he’d known he would, but he felt he lacked life experience. He’d gone directly from high school to seminary, and apart from one summer working on a survey crew, all of his summer jobs had been church related.

When it came to careers he’d only ever wanted to be an Anglican priest. And, as readers well know, a pilot.

So, when his income tax refund was $550, the exact-same amount required to pay for flying lessons, he signed up and earned his private licence at High River. And, as he’d hoped, he met many people outside the church and began to make friends apart from church association. Getting to know people from different backgrounds, and being in different circumstances and situations enabled him to broaden his horizons and to learn from the experiences of others. It’s made him a better priest and a better person, he says.

Rod eventually attained his airline transport pilot’s licence, and his own plane. He became a flight instructor and continues to teach to this day. In the church, over the years, he’s served as rector, chaplain, archdeacon and Bishop of Saskatoon.

Today, retired from the church, he’s the proud owner of a 1945 John Deere AR, identical to the one he learned to drive as a boy on his grandparents’ farm. When he’s not driving it at Saskatoon’s Pion-Era, the Borden Threshing Day and a few other events, he keeps it in his airplane hangar.

Rod took over the job of writing the Reflections column for the Country Guide 20 years ago, but his association with the magazine goes back 60 and more years to those long summer evenings on his grandparents’ farm when he would pore over the Guide’s ads for farm machinery and listen to his family talk about buying a new tractor. He wrote his first column in September 1994 and through 20 years and four editors, he’s never missed a deadline.

“Every now and then I go to garage sales and see...”

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somebody selling back issues of the Country Guide. I’ve collected a few,” Rod says. He’s also learned a bit about the history of the column. Country Guide has been around since 1882 and has almost always had an inspirational column. Bishop Morse Goodman, who passed away on December 12, 1993, wrote it from 1961 to 1993. At that time the Reflections column was part of a Family Living section which included recipes and articles on subjects such as canning and sewing.

Rod remembers Bishop Goodman, and remembers him jotting down notes on a sheet of foolscap at church meetings, as he pondered an idea for his column. After Bishop Goodman passed away, Guide editor Colleen Armstrong ran some of his columns for a few months. That summer Rod contacted her and applied for the job. “I took the initiative,” he says. “I said this has been a good thing. I’m sure many people appreciate it. It seems to be an important part of the Country Guide.” She asked him to write a couple of sample columns, which he did, knowing that other writers were also on the short list. He was delighted when she called and offered him the job.

In writing the Reflections column, Rod’s goal is to focus on common human issues such as forgiveness, community and personal relationships. He often writes about the concerns of small churches. “Readers attend a variety of churches and many do not attend church at all,” he says. “I try to find themes that speak to real life for Country Guide readers. I also try to expand those themes by touching on global issues.”

In Reflections, he’s written on everything from the existence of God to volunteering, from a visit to China to cussing, from enemies to healing. He sometimes receives requests to copy his columns, and always says yes.

His editors do too. One column a decade ago was about the harm that gossip does. A reader from a small town in Western Canada asked for permission from Rod’s editor to copy the article, and distribute it to every person in his town.

Rod also thinks carefully about the scripture readings he recommends at the end of each column, saying specifically of this month’s selections, “I find both passages meaningful.” From such a man, that is an assurance that what was happening beyond the what was happening beyond the mountain peaks. Surprisingly, little changed while we were tuned out. The “pause button” worked.

I am teaching Matthew, a Saskatoon teenager, to fly. He had a student pilot permit when he was 14. I sent him solo in an airplane before he had a driver’s licence. His parents drove him to the airport for lessons. He is 16 now, owns his first car, has a girlfriend, gets good marks in school and has a part-time job. Is Matthew packing too much into his young life? He is one more teenager pressing the “fast-forward” button on the machine of life.

When life is good, we wish we could hit a “hold” button. New relationships excite us. We wish we could hang on to the initial pleasure forever. Imagine pushing a “hold” button when sitting by a tranquil lake on a warm evening, relishing a sunset or celebrating a special event with friends. Such moments pass too quickly. If only we could stay in the present a little while longer.

When we run into a bump in the road, we would like to have a “rewind” button. Frank Sinatra sang, “Regrets, I’ve had a few.” I occasionally think, “If only I could go back and do that over again.” We may wish for a “delete” button.

In our senior years we feel life speeds up, even though the days have the same number of hours and the weeks are still seven days long. Days that used to drag by are over in a flash.

In August we went to a drive-in movie. We sat in folding chairs next to our pickup and ate popcorn. As the sun was setting in a crimson glow behind the big screen, the story came alive. It was not much of a movie, but the experience was nostalgic. My mind wandered as I watched for shooting stars and satellites. As the sky grew darker, I focused on the movie. The principal character, clinging to a tree branch on the side of a mountain, was in a precarious spot. He needed a dramatic rescue. As I sat traumatized by his situation, my wife Jacqueline reminded me, “It’s only a movie.”

When the movie ended, we followed a chain of tail lights to the exit. Back at the campground I fell asleep quickly but woke with images of the miraculous rescue. The actor was plucked off the cliff by some improbable helicopter antics. I lay awake thinking, “How did they do that?” It was just a movie.

Life, however, is not just a movie. Next morning the news told of racial tensions in Ferguson, Missouri, rockets between Israel and Gaza, a religious minority captured on a mountainside with no food or water and certain death if they descend. There is no fast-forward, pause, rewind or delete. Life can be harsh and cruel. Is there some way we can use the time God gives to make a kinder, gentler world?

Suggested Scripture: Ecclesiastes 9:7-18, Ephesians 5:15-20

Rod Andrews is a retired Anglican bishop. He lives in Saskatoon.
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