

& OPEN FORUM

CONSUMER EDUCATION | SOCIAL MEDIA

Defend agriculture by communicating

BY KARI DOERKSEN

I grew up in a small agricultural community, spent seven years in Canada's best agriculture college at the University of Saskatchewan and was a research scientist for about eight years.

I do not consider myself an agricultural or scientific expert, but I do think agriculture, and the way we talk about it, is important.

The way we communicate and look for information is changing. More than ever, people are going to the internet for their daily news. When we want to know something, what do we do? We used to use an encyclopedia, now we use Google. This is a fundamental change and not a passing fad.

When the public, including policy makers and politicians, searches for biotechnology or agriculture topics on the internet, what do they find?

Unfortunately, they are not finding a balanced conversation about agriculture or science. Several anti-agriculture science groups have caught on to the power of social media and are using it to influence public opinion.

They are using successful ways to spread fear and half-truths about how producers treat their animals and land, and there is little opposing information to balance things out.

I nervously joined Twitter about two years ago. I quickly found a small but mighty agriculture community online — farmers, nutritionists and advocates. How wonderful.

But the community is small, most of them are from the United States, and there is a noticeable lack of agricul-



More farmers should share their stories to the wider world by using social media, says an agricultural expert. | FILE PHOTO

ture scientists.

Producers and ag researchers need to get more involved.

Public opinion does affect government policy. Government policy does affect agriculture research funding and regulation. Research and informed public policy are keys to producers' ability to provide safe and nutritious food in a responsible way and to remain competitive in the national and international marketplace.

So why does social media matter?

Because now, when the public, policy makers and politicians Google science and agriculture topics, these little things called blogs and tweets

show up in the search results. What kind of information do you want them to see?

The question is where to start. I suggest getting involved, slowly if you need to. Bite the bullet. Use Google. Find trusted agricultural organizations. Read a producer's blog (try Shaun Haney at www.realagriculture.com or @shaunhaney. Find farmers' blogs at www.causematters.com). If you do not use the internet, tell someone else about it. Maybe they are interested.

Be a leader, and help others become leaders. The practice of leadership challenges us to listen to, understand and respect others, even if we have

WEBSITES FOR IDEAS AND SUPPORT

- Mike Haley @farmerhaley. He is a farmer and a leader. Visit flavors.me/farmhaley.
- AdFarm at www.adfarmonline.com/blog/aroundthefarm
- Just Farmers at www.justfarmers.biz/blog
- Ag Chat Foundation at agchat.org/about

differences of opinion. Authentic leaders leave their egos at the door. Passionate, honest, humble and courageous people rarely need to sell anything.

We can rethink communication. In the science community we spend a lot of time discussing how we can make the public understand science. We say, "if only the people understood the science, all of our problems would be solved."

I suggest emphasis could be less on making the public understand science and agriculture at a detailed level. Farming is complicated. Does the public want to understand this complicated subject at a detailed level? I think that most people don't have a lot of time for this much in-depth learning.

But people, including me, are curious about you, why you do what you do and what you think about all of this controversy around food.

Tell your story. We're listening.

Kari Doerksen is senior project manager for Valgen, a genomics research project.

HUNGER | FOOD BANKS

Help feed hungry in your community

EDITORIAL NOTEBOOK



JOANNE PAULSON, EDITOR

You hear many complaints about how the 2008-09 recession obliterated people's savings, in some cases by 30 to 50 percent or even more. Particularly for those nearing or in retirement, that was disastrous.

For some of those seniors, along with people of all ages across Canada, the recession hit even harder. It hit them in the stomach.

According to a 2011 study by Food Banks Canada called Hunger Count, 851,014 people accepted food from a food bank in March of that year, 26 percent more than pre-recession levels.

We think the economy out here in the West is fabulous, but it isn't for everyone.

Assistance in Alberta soared between 2008 and 2011, up 75 percent to 58,735 people.

In Saskatchewan, 20,665 people needed food, up 16.4 percent from 2008. In Manitoba, the number rose 37 percent to 55,575.

Even in our better economies, the need persists.

Food banks do their best to get the message out that they need donations of food and money to help those who are struggling, but they need all the help they can get.

Farm Credit Canada, to that end, has been operating its FCC Drive Away Hunger campaign since 2004, when an Ontario employee drove a tractor and trailer through the province for eight days, collecting food and donations.

Since then, FCC, with your help, has collected 7.8 million pounds of food for food banks. Last year, the total was 2.4 million lb. Not bad for one collection drive.

This year, the campaign begins Sept. 24 and runs until Oct. 19, including tractor-trailer tours in mid-October through Alberta, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick and Quebec. Donations can also be dropped off at any FCC office.

It's depressing to note that food banks were started in the early 1980s — there's that recession issue again — as a short-term emergency response to poverty. As Hunger Count notes, "they are not, and were never meant to be, an acceptable long-term approach to this problem."

Unfortunately, we haven't solved the problems yet. Fortunately, people can still access food banks, with help from you, from us, from Drive Away Hunger and FCC.

If you have any questions about how you can help, call 800-387-3232 or visit www.fccdriveawayhunger.ca.

WEATHER, DISEASE | ALL SECTORS SUFFER

September brings bad news across the West

HURSH ON AG



KEVIN HURSH

September has not been kind to western Canadian agriculture.

The wind has been absolutely crazy: 70 to 90 km/h over an extended time frame and a large geographic area. Swathed canola didn't stand a chance, particularly if it had dried down and was close to combining.

Scattered canola swaths are not uncommon in the fall, but this year's damage could be the most widespread and expensive in the history of Canadian canola production.

Analysts trying to estimate the loss are coming up with staggering numbers.

So close to the bin. So disappointing.

This on top of myriad other canola woes: sclerotinia, aster yellows, spring flooding, summer heat.

Yes, the price is up dramatically, but production is dramatically disappointing.

Producers lucky enough to harvest their canola before the big winds may be facing another disappointment. They may not have as much canola as they thought. In many instances, bushel weights are low. A 5,000 bushel bin may be holding only 4,500 bu. Producers need to be careful not to contract more than they have.

September has been a devastating month for the Canadian hog industry. Big Sky Farms is in receivership and Puratone has filed for bankruptcy protection. Big Sky is Saskatchewan's largest hog producer. Puratone is the third largest in Manitoba.

Big Sky went through creditor protection and was restructured a couple years ago. Many creditors had to take a haircut. Now the operation is likely to be sold for a fraction of replacement value, or it may be sold off in pieces.

The nail in the coffin has been the dramatic rise in feed grain prices, spurred by the shortfall in American corn production.

Large hog operations don't evoke a lot of public sympathy, but hog farms of all sizes have been dropping like flies. They just don't garner media attention.

The industry has faced difficult economics for years. Over that extended time frame, profitability has been fleeting and marginal, unable to stack up against the extended periods of huge losses. Now, even the heavyweights in the industry are going down.

Prices will still be profitable for cow-calf producers looking forward to the upcoming fall calf run, maybe even a bit better than last fall. But they will be nowhere near the levels expected a few short months ago. High feed costs are again the culprit.

Lopping \$100 or more from the price of each calf is bitter medicine. This is a case when price insurance based off the futures market could have paid large dividends.

For the southern Prairies, concern is now focussing on the lack of moisture. While great for harvest progress, it's never healthy to see virtually no precipitation for months.

Pastures have dried up and water supplies are a problem in some areas. Fall weed control is affected, as is seeding of winter crops.

Big grass and stubble fires have been whipped up by the high winds. The fire threat remains extreme.

September 2012 will also be remembered as the time when federal and provincial agriculture ministers trimmed farm safety net support levels.

On the bright side, grain prices are high, fertilizer prices haven't spiked, there's crop in the bin, harvest has been early, the grain transportation system seems to be working well, cow-calf production is profitable and there's lots of time for the south to get much needed moisture.

But September has still been ugly.

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