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REAL Beef: Linking Food Consumers with Land Stewards

After another full day at work, you come flying into the house, slap a couple steaks on the barbeque and eat – before rushing off to kids’ sports, music lessons, community meetings ... sound familiar? In the constant swirl of life’s activity, you may not put any particular thought into checking to see if you are purchasing Alberta beef.

“Many Albertans no longer have a personal connection to farms or the source of the food we eat,” says Patricia Macklin, senior project coordinator, rural initiatives and research, with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. “A generation ago, we would have had at least a close relative who farmed, and would have likely had some link to the land and food production. As the farm population shrinks with every census, most of us have lost that vital connection to our food, where it’s produced and who grows it.”

The Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Society, better known as Cows and Fish, has spent the last 15 months working on REAL (Ranchers Enhancing Alberta’s Landscapes) Beef, a project to reconnect Albertans with Alberta food sources. The core work of Cows and Fish is promoting and educating producers on sustainable riparian management; the intersection with local food is one way to address that mandate.

“Our objective with REAL Beef is to help rural communities and agricultural producers link to urban, consumer communities by developing and delivering a framework to showcase and promote sustainable food production,” says Norine Ambrose, executive director of Cows and Fish, a project funded by the Government of Alberta’s Rural Community Adaptation Program and the W. Garfield Weston Foundation.

The REAL beef pilot project, intended to show that agricultural and environmental sustainability can be met in food

production, originally involved six producers. Each producer’s operation received Cows and Fish landscape health validation. Several sustainable food workshops were organized to link those who eat with those who produce, and included an educational component for consumers who attended.

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Consumer tours of sustainably managed riparian pastures, followed by a meal with beef and other locally raised food, led to sincere and meaningful interactions between producers and consumers and a greater awareness of the challenges and progress in sustainable grazing practices.

While face-to-face interaction is ideal for creating relationships and increasing understanding, the program has grown to include a web-based component. Six producer and one food consumer created video-narratives combine recorded voice with still or moving images and music, and help connect consumers with producers.

Sunrise Farm is an 800 acre mixed-farm in the Killam area that is holistically and organically managed by Don & Marie Ruzicka. The Ruzickas believe if the land is managed well, it will reflect on the health of the plant communities, resulting in healthy, nutritious and great tasting meats. Don, who direct markets beef, chicken, turkey and pork says, "I wanted to do a story of our farm for consumers to understand both what I'm doing and why."

The online stories were premiered in Edmonton at Farm Fair and have been presented at several conferences. Cows and Fish representatives have had watershed groups and local food groups contact them to come and present the stories at meetings.

Producers are using both stories and landscape health validations on their own websites to help communicate their story to the world.

Moving forward, the REAL beef project is working with producers and consumers to create more stories. Plans are afoot to hold another premiere event in Lethbridge in early 2012.

Groups interested in working formally with Cows and Fish to help develop and promote REAL beef stories, are asked to contact Norine Ambrose at 403-381-5538.

Thanks to the stories of REAL beef ranchers, Albertans have the opportunity to be a little more knowledgeable, a little less complacent and a whole lot more connected to Alberta producers.

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Growing Forward Program Responds to Industry Demand

Solar photovoltaic (PV) technology is a type of renewable energy production that can help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and in some cases can help save on electricity costs, as well as providing a means to participate in certain green-marketing opportunities. To help Alberta producers take advantage of the saving and earning possibilities, Growing

Forward has initiated a Solar PV Equipment Pilot program. The program is designed to provide modest financial support to bona fide farmers installing grid-connected, minimum 2.2 kW size, solar (PV) systems on their operation to produce electricity.

"Renewable energy can play a role in a farm's overall energy management plan," says Kelly Lund, project engineer, energy and climate change section, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. "Part of the research goal of this program is to collect data on whether small-scale installed solar PV systems can provide the energy production performance that was predicted in the design stage, when it is installed with optimized specifications. Other important data that will be collected is the ongoing operation and maintenance costs of installed systems. This combined data will be developed into educational materials that can help other producers decide if solar PV technology is a good fit for their operation."

The Solar PV Equipment Pilot Program opened on January 30, 2012. The cap set for the program is \$19,500 per applicant. There is a limited amount of funding available in the pilot program, and applications will be accepted on a first come, first served basis.

Current Alberta producers running an agricultural operation with a minimum \$10,000 annual gross agricultural income and meeting eligibility for a farm fuel number are eligible to apply for the Solar Assessment and Solar PV Equipment Pilot program.

Eligibility details and program Terms and Conditions are provided online. To enter the program, applicants must first apply for a site assessment using the Solar Assessment Application form. This assessment form is available to eligible producers free of charge, and a successful Solar Assessment is a pre-requisite to apply under this program.

If the Solar Assessment site visit is successful, the Applicant will receive a report that indicates they are eligible to apply to the Solar PV Equipment Pilot grant. Application forms for the Solar PV Equipment Pilot program will be provided directly by Program staff or the Assessor, only to eligible Applicants.

For more information on the program, eligibility, information on how to apply and the application form, visit the website at www.growingforward.alberta.ca and click on the Solar PV Equipment Pilot Program in the Available Programs menu.

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Fruits and Vegetables and the 2012 Alberta Farm Fresh Local Food Short Course

Are you considering getting into horticulture crop production or are thinking about diversifying your existing operation? Are fruits or vegetables on your list of “maybe crops?” Are you involved in or are interested in getting into direct marketed production (fruit, vegetables, protein, other)? Then look no further than the Alberta Farm Fresh Local Food Short Course (formerly the Berry and Vegetable School), being held March 1 and 2, 2012, at the Black Knight Inn in Red Deer.

This conference is an opportunity for new, potential or experienced fruit, vegetable and direct market protein producers to learn and interact. This year’s schedule includes introductory and advanced streams, with fruit-related topics on the first day and vegetable-related topics on the second day and a protein stream on both days. There is something for everyone.

For new or potential producers, learn about strawberry, raspberry, Saskatoon berry and field vegetable production, in an interactive setting. Get introduced to the various diseases and insect pests and their management. Find out what things you need to consider when starting up new ventures. Hear some of the things that experienced producers think you should do or should avoid doing, in order to be successful.

For the more experienced growers, prepare to participate in interactive sessions that delve into more detail on topics such as soil management, post-harvest handling, food safety, new and potential vegetable and strawberry varieties and potential fruit pest issues, among others. Learn a lot more about direct marketing channels and their ins and outs, as well as agri-tourism and CSAs (for both fruits, vegetables and animals), plus accessing financial assistance and how to make sense of current government programs.

Regardless of what sessions you participate in, you’ll find lots of opportunities to learn, network and share your own knowledge and experiences with other participants. Come for one or two days. For a tentative agenda and registration information, visit the Alberta Farm Fresh Producers Association website at www.albertafarmfresh.com

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Alberta Lamb Producers Reap Rewards from Flock Management Technology

Alberta’s lamb producers are answering the challenge to adapt their businesses to take advantage of growing demand for their product. Numbers are up, which can be partly attributed to producers embracing technology that helps improve the management of their flock.

“Alberta’s lamb industry makes up more than 17 per cent of Canada’s total flock size – and that number is continuing to grow,” says Margaret Cook, executive director of the Alberta Lamb Producers (ALP). “We’re the only province in Canada that has seen a significant increase in flock size – we’re up 2.2 per cent in one year, to a total flock of 183,000 animals. Part of that growth can be attributed to improved management practices and a willingness to lead the way in adopting advanced technology.”

Over the past several years Alberta producers have been introducing radio frequency identification technologies, or RFID tags and programs, into their operations as part of the traceability initiative in the industry. RFID tags provide enhanced animal identification and movement, and RFID technology provides advantages for flock management and opportunities for higher returns for producers.

The electronic tags and software provide a number of additional benefits for producers, including streamlining and making record keeping more accurate, which can identify superior breeding stock, pinpoint poor performers and help producers be more efficient with labour use. They offer feedlot owners opportunities to improve productivity and enhance tracking processes, and they offer smaller producers new and different ways to use feedlots.

Much of this information was gathered during the Alberta Lamb Traceability Pilot Project, a collaborative project with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development funded by Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency (ALMA). The project reviewed and field-tested RFID technology systems to see which hardware, software and system components combine to work best for the Alberta sheep industry. In addition to tracking how the tags could benefit on-farm management, the research project took the tag information into Alberta’s lamb supply chain to see how it could be used throughout the sector. Other provinces in Canada, and countries around the world, are now studying the project’s findings.

In 2011, on behalf of their members, ALP advocated for financial assistance for RFID technology implementation. In the late fall, the Alberta government through Growing Forward funding, made a \$300,000 grant available to help producers offset the costs of adopting RFID technology. Over half of that funding has already been allocated.

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“Producers need to act quickly as all purchases must be made by February 29, 2012. The deadline to apply for funding under the Sheep RFID Technology Assistance Program is March 1, 2012,” says Cook. “We worked with government last year to bring producers over \$900,000 in RFID tag incentives from Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. That program was well received by members and it shows the commitment this industry has to modernizing. This new program is an excellent opportunity for Alberta producers to implement RFID technology to help their operations.”

The program pays 70 per cent of the cost of eligible hand-held readers, RFID software, and training costs, to a maximum of \$5,000 per sheep operation. For details of eligible equipment and application forms, visit www.sheepcentral.ca

Alberta Lamb Producers is a producer directed and funded organization that represents the interests of Alberta sheep and wool producers to help build a sustainable, thriving sheep industry. ALP provides every producer with a voice and ongoing representation to government and other industry members. ALP is responsible for a variety of programs all aimed at supporting producers and ensuring the continued growth and profitability of the industry.

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Nominations Open for Alberta Agriculture Hall of Fame

The Alberta Agriculture Hall of Fame is accepting nominations to honour individuals who have made significant contributions to Alberta's agriculture and agri-food industry.

Every two years, Alberta's Agriculture Hall of Fame recognizes up to three Albertans whose outstanding leadership, innovation and business practices have advanced Alberta's agriculture and food industry at the community, provincial, national or international level.

Since 1951, the Alberta Agriculture Hall of Fame has celebrated the accomplishments of men and women who have dedicated their lives to agriculture and their rural communities. The 123 inductees have been innovators and risk-takers in every area of agriculture from innovative farming techniques to scientific accomplishments, creating value-added products and other outstanding contributions that have had a lasting, positive impact on agriculture.

The 2012 inductees will be honoured in Edmonton next

October at a celebration ceremony.

More information about the Hall of Fame and nomination forms can be found on Alberta Agriculture's website at www.agriculture.alberta.ca/halloffame, or by calling 780-422-0492. You can also call toll free at 310-0000.

The deadline for nominations is April 30, 2012.

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Rural Residents Seminar in Springbank

The Springbank Heritage Club is hosting a free one-day seminar on March 10, 2012. The

Workshop will focus on the day-to-day maintenance and operation of property – including septic systems, water systems, risk assessments and county programs. Education materials and information easily accessible to the rural public of Rocky View and Foothills will be featured. The ultimate goal of this seminar is the prevention of high turn-around of rural real estate due to misinformation and unrealistic expectations when moving to a rural property.

Presenters on the agenda include:

- Joe Petryk, senior field inspector, Private Sewage Systems, Municipal Affairs – different types of septic systems; descriptions of common septic systems, their compliance or non-compliance issues; some general maintenance to extend the life of their systems; risks involved in failed systems; and rules governing installation of new septic systems.
- Brandon Leask, agricultural water engineer, Agriculture and Rural Development – different types of wells and cistern systems; acknowledging the risks involved in particular well situations such as abandoned wells, providing information on natural waterways and what effect the laws have on property owners regarding them; general maintenance of wells; the risks and guidelines for dugouts.
- Perry Phillips, program development specialist and Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) program lead, Agriculture and Rural Development – the role of EFP on farm properties; addressing the risks involved in farm properties; show-casing the new website and concept of the program.

Rural residents in the MD's of Rocky View and Foothills, acreage owners, but specifically local farm and ranch residents will find the information offered at this free seminar of value. As well as an information-packed agenda, the event will feature a trade show with local rural-specialist vendors (septic system

inspector, water hauler, property inspector, well drilling company, mortgage broker, etc.) to answer questions and give information.

A local 4H club will provide refreshments and lunch as a 4-H fundraiser.

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Agri-News Briefs

2012 Varieties Factsheets Available

The 2012 Varieties of Cereal and Oilseed Crops for Alberta (Agdex 100/32) and the Varieties of Pulse Crops for Alberta (Agdex 142/32-1) factsheets have now been published and are available on the web and in hardcopy. Both factsheets have been posted to the Alberta Agriculture website in e-book format or as a downloadable pdf. To access the e-book online, go to www.agriculture.alberta.ca and type 2012 Varieties in the search field. To order a hardcopy of the factsheets, call 310-FARM (3276) toll-free in Alberta.

Advancing the Bio-economy: Biomass in a Canadian Energy Strategy

Recognizing the array of energy resources and options from hydrocarbons and renewable energy forms, Canada is contemplating the development of a Canadian Energy Strategy. In 2012, CanBio will develop a Canadian Bioenergy Strategy outlining the use of biomass for the production of bio-energy, bio-chemicals, bio-pharmaceuticals, and other bio-materials, and creating new jobs across the country. CanBio is holding a conference and trade show in Alberta to explore options to develop the bio-economy, and options for utilities, oil and gas, forestry, agriculture and bioenergy industry. The Advancing the Bio-economy conference is being held in Edmonton on April 25 and 26, 2012, and features a pre-conference tour on April 24. Registration for the pre-conference tour is \$90, GST included. Conference registration is \$410 plus GST; however, early bird prices are available beginning at \$360, CanBio members receive additional discounts. A full agenda and online registration are available on the CanBio website at www.canbio.ca. For further information, contact Noam Sugarman at info@canbio.ca or 705-472-2280.