

Exceptional Assets in Agriculture

Recollections and Reflections (50 years of Saskatchewan Agricultural Hall of Fame)

Simply put, an asset is a useful or valuable thing, person or quality. In organizations and industries, assets often sustain production and growth. Saskatchewan and indeed Canadian Agriculture have some great assets unique to us that make us proud!

Plant Breeding is one of the shortest and most effective routes to improving global health through better nutrition (FAO/UN) . We can attest to that through the efforts of CDC plant breeders Bryan Harvey (2006), Brian Rossnagel (2010) and Gordon Rowland (2013)

Collectively these men and their development teams have created well over 100 barley, oat and flax varieties that have very positively impacted Canada's agriculture and food industries. Notable varieties include CDC Harrington, CDC Congress and CDC Austenson for barley, Calibre, CDC Dancer and Derby for oats CDC Bethune, CDC Vimy for flax. As well, they had established and maintained a diverse germplasm base for future breeders to draw upon within their breeding programs.

"I wasn't born on a farm, but I got there as soon as I could" would certainly have been the wish of Harvey from Wales, and Rowland from Winnipeg. Rossnagel was born on a farm but life circumstances changed his farming dream. Although, none technically farmed, they all agree their career path in plant breeding allowed for deep understanding of agriculture and involvement in many aspects of the agriculture industry, including the producer sector. All maintain that their close relationship with farmers was key to their success, as they kept these breeders' feet on the ground, provided solid commentary on what was required and above all, fully supported their efforts. This support, combined with their communication efforts with the end users proved to be a formula for success for western Canada's agricultural sector.

Since induction, Harvey retired but stays active on several industry and university organizations as well as continuing to curl and golf. In July 2020, he was inducted into the Canadian Agriculture Hall of Fame. His citation in part suggests that one of his varieties CDC Copeland has grown enough acres to brew thirty bottles of beer for every person on earth. That's a lot of beer and barley! An earlier variety of his, Harrington, accounted for 75% of the 1991 malt acreage.

Rossnagel retired in 2011 but continued part time involvement with CDC barley and oat program and was active with Saskatoon Prairieland Park Board, until 2019, when he and his wife moved to Victoria B.C. A CDC report on economic impact of CDC varieties suggested in 2016 that Rossnagel feed barley varieties accounted for 65% of feed barley varieties being utilized in time period 1995-2006. Rossnagel's oat program research, among other things, gave rise to a number of improvements to milling oat varieties which led to Canada being a significant supplier of oat for food in the world.

Rowland had retired previous to his induction and moved to B.C. to be closer to the grandkids. For the period 2005-2009 CDC Bethune accounted for over 60% of Saskatchewan flax acreage according to that same report.

All three agree on the biggest challenge facing agriculture today, that of the increasing misinformation about science and agriculture and declining understanding of the central role agriculture plays in society. They all believe that this is where leadership becomes vital to address this and reestablish the public trust in agriculture and the responsible people operating within its system .

When quizzed about their hopes for the next generation in agriculture: Harvey hopes we continue to attract top minds to agriculture; to be science based and continue to inform the world of the facts related to agriculture and to counter the misinformation that abounds. Rossnagel says "That they will have as much fun working in this wonderful and rewarding industry as I have had for the past 50 years!". Rowland's view is that we need advocates for agriculture in the public arena, leaders that understand and are able to communicate the challenges and opportunities for agriculture in Canada.

Advice for future plant breeders: “Focus on what matters to farmers, the rest will follow” says Rossnagel. Harvey advises “Keep the end user firmly in mind and avoid the flavour of the month mentality (plant breeding is a long term strategy).” Rowland’s message is simple “Be patient and be humble”

When it comes to plant breeders around the world, Saskatchewan absolutely acclaims these provincial assets. As singer Tina Turner would say “You’re simply the best, Better than all the rest!