

Partner Profile: Alberta Pulse Growers – Why Sustainability Matters

Submitted by Alberta Pulse Growers Commission

Increasing population, pressure on the land base, demands on water and challenges to biodiversity – these are all trends that will dramatically affect the future. What can agriculture do to keep these trends from limiting production? What role will the cropping sector play? How can industry contribute to the sustainability discussion? More specifically, why do pulse growers care?

Since 1989, when Alberta Pulse Growers (APG) became a recognized Commission with legislation governing their operations, the organization has been working to help farmers sell more pulses. Seeded pulse acres have also grown in that time from around 63,000 acres to over 1.5 million and the number of producers who grow pulse crops has also increased. Today, APG represents over 5,000 growers in Alberta. The organization is producer-led and focused on supporting the research, marketing, and extension as well as consumer and producer outreach with respect to the following crops: field pea, dry bean, chickpea, lentil, faba bean and soybean.

Pulses are primarily marketed as an export crop leaving Canadian shores to feed populations elsewhere. Canada is one of the largest export countries providing pulses to the world. Alberta comes in second of all Canadian provinces in producing field peas, third in dry bean production and is quickly becoming a significant producer of faba bean. Lentils and chickpeas are smaller acres but also part of the export contribution. Soybean is still considered a new crop for Alberta and while acres are small at this time, there is potential in the future for this crop.

Key areas of interest for the organization include investments in research – agronomy, breeding, health and nutrition, and pulse ingredient innovation, as well as providing grower extension and outreach to both consumers and producers about benefits of pulses. In addition, APG works with pulse grower organizations and the trade (pulse processors and exporters) from across Canada through Pulse Canada, the national organization. From a national perspective, issues such as transportation, market access, health and nutrition, food product innovation and sustainability are the focus.

Pulse crops have a fantastic sustainability story. From the farm to the plate, pulse crops have a great fit in a sustainable environment. With a low carbon footprint due to their ability to fix nitrogen, this reduces global greenhouse gases because there is less use of nitrogen fertilizers – a major contributor to emissions. Another advantage tied to nitrogen fixing abilities of pulse crops and reduction in fertilizer use is that less fertilizer is needed to be produced so they contribute to reduced consumption of non-renewable energy.

Farmers who have experienced pulses as part of their rotations have also realized what the crop does for them. From benefits of early seeding-early harvest, use of less inputs because of plant nodulation and nitrogen fixation, and having a crop that returns soil to a farmer-described ‘mellow’ state. In rotation, pulses break insect and weed cycles and can provide opportunities for increasing diversity of soil microorganisms which can be beneficial to the next crop on the

land. Another benefit is through adaptation because pulse crops can tolerate some drought stress slightly better than other crops. Pulses provide other advantages, like leaving residual nitrogen in the soil for the next crop in rotation.

With this terrific sustainability contribution that pulses provide to the farm, the pulse industry under Pulse Canada, has leveraged this message into a broader initiatives. Pulse Canada is engaged as an affiliate member with the *Sustainable Agriculture Initiative* platform – the only global food industry sustainable platform for agriculture. Growers from across Canada have participated in meetings where they can engage global food companies like Unilever, McDonalds, and General Mills about sustainable initiatives. By interacting with this organization, growers learn what types of market demands will be placed into the value chain and they can better prepare for the future. They can also give a perspective to the companies about the implications of sustainability schemes.

In 2016, Alberta Pulse Growers has an opportunity to share the sustainability message around pulse crops through a collection of messages celebrating the International Year of Pulses. Declared by the United Nations, International Year of Pulses will celebrate pulse crops and their contributions to a variety of areas including food security, health, nutrition and food innovation, market access and stability, creating awareness, production and sustainability.

So while the world deals with the challenges around population increases, land pressures, and demands on water and biodiversity, sustainability is an important solution and the pulse industry is well positioned. So why do pulse growers care? Because they can make a difference.

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