

MARKETING LOCALLY???

A study performed by the U of M's Environmental Conservation Lab

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An obvious difference between a pessimistic person and an optimistic person is how they adapt to adversity. Negative consequences of the trade ban for the livestock industry following the discovery of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in Alberta were significant; the loss of beef export markets resulted in plummeting livestock values. A very optimistic group from rural Manitoba identified the need and opportunity for an enterprise based out of the Harvest Moon Society (HMS) to market a product line, consistent with the HMS principals of fostering natural, sustainable local food systems.

Colin Anderson, who works out of the Environmental Conservation Laboratory at the University of Manitoba (this group is linked with the HMS), took part in a course created by Stephane McLachlan, where 27 students visited Clearwater for ten days as a means of learning and understanding the issues of rural communities, agriculture and rural decline. "That is when I met

many of the folks involved in the project and where my research ideas really came together. My academic interests are in studying enabling rural renewal/adaptation," explained Colin. Two years later the group still meets regularly and they have attracted producers from areas such as Treherne, Swan Lake, Cartwright, Killarney, St. Claude, Clearwater, Pilot Mound, Ninette and Baldur to name a few.

Having grown up in Cypress River (second son of Marvin and Marianne Anderson), Colin's interests and concerns in rural issues are from the heart and commented that he is "intimately connected to the land."

His concerns don't begin and end with the land; he has many, namely rural population decline. The marketing group for which he is very active is committed to reversing the trend of rural decline.

"We have already witnessed the effects of rural decline as rural schools and elevators have been closed, the list goes on and on. Growing locally is only one small piece, the challenge is so complicated, one question just leads to another," he said.

In 2006 a group of five farm families from South Central Manitoba met and recognized the need and opportunity for an enterprise based out of the Harvest Moon Society. The marketing group identified the following as its first draft of a vision statement, "We are a local community committed to ethically producing and marketing high quality, healthy food for the betterment of humankind and the environment now and for generations to come."

Their mantra seems simple, but Colin commented that it is not as easy as it seems. "The group has to share practical resources by pooling money, sharing risks and have funds in place to hire a marketer for the products," explained Colin as he took a break from a day of speaking at a symposium at the University of Winnipeg where the group was promoting provincially grown products and connecting the urban people with the rural. "Local food isn't just about dollars and cents, it's about connecting the two groups together," he commented.

Pam and Clint Cavers of Pilot Mound are one of the farm families involved in the group.

They are in their early 30's with three daughters and are the fourth generation to live on the family farm. Clint commented that they began by farming conventionally with his family, then in 2000 he and Pam branched out on their own as they became more environmentally conscious. "Our animals aren't confined; they are raised out on the land. We use very little antibiotics, very little to no sprays and chemicals. We have found our pastures and animals healthier. The first year we weren't sure, but each year we see definite improvements," said Clint.

The Cavers became involved with the group when it formed in 2006 as they knew they wanted to market their products locally, but needed some guidance in the process. He explained that the Harvest Moon Society has always been in the background but this group also organizes guidance and continuing research from the University of Manitoba Environmental Conservation Laboratory, Hiefer International, to offer potential funds and M.A.F.R.I. Go Teams for ongoing support.

Although the Cavers changed from conventional farming in

2000 there are some members in the group who are there as a direct consequence of the BSE crisis; Arvid and Allison Dalzell of Baldur are a prime example.

The Dalzells have had what could be thought of as their fair share of hardships. After fifteen years operating a beef and grain farm Arvid sold all his machinery, cattle and assets as a means of keeping their ranch. He began a construction company and in eight years had flourished to the point where he was totally debt free. His love of the land lured him back; however he changed his operation by becoming an environmentally green ranch. Beginning by sowing land for pasture and hay, the Dalzells eventually had 400 head of cattle and 780 acres of green land. All was well on the ranch until May of 2003 when the BSE crisis resulted in Arvid having to make another major change to keep his operation viable. Not unlike any cattle rancher in the country, Arvid could not get a good dollar for his herd and was forced to calve them out. "We ended up with a very large herd which we couldn't sell

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and were once again on the brink of financial disaster," he explained.

"If it isn't working, change it," said Arvid during a recent interview. Change is what he did. He and Allison decided to purchase a meat shop and converted a section of their three car garage into a cutting floor and cooler. They received the province's stamp of approval on May 17, 2004 and have operated a successful business ever since marketing their products in the local area. They are presently working on expansion and have acquired markets in Brandon, Winnipeg as well as Portage La Prairie.

The Dalzells have been involved with the marketing group since it was introduced in 2006. "Although I don't market my products through Harvest Moon I have gained valuable knowable through this group and am able to share my past experiences with them as well," he commented.

As Colin explained, although the group is made up of experienced producers very few have any marketing experience and Arvid found that he might be able to offer some ideas and strategies. "Colin has been a Godsend to us, he has not only organized our group but has given us direction," complimented Arvid.

Research conducted by the Environmental Conservation Lab in and with rural communities has enabled them to advocate the importance of local knowledge and experience in adapting to disease such as BSE as well as change associated with genetically modified crops. "It is clear that direct marketing will play a further role in facilitating adaptation associated with stressors. The proposed research will identify how direct marketing and new generation co-ops help producers adapt to crisis as well as the benefits and barriers that have been experienced," said Colin in closing.