

# GRASSROOTS NEWS & VIEWS



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## NOVEMBER 2019

### Directors Note - Marcel Busz

Howdy Folks;

Here is an update on some of the things that get discussed at Foothills Forage board meetings. Some of the money we use to operate this organization comes from government grants but with an election year, new leadership in Edmonton and re-configuring of the provincial budget the Agriculture Opportunity Fund (AOF) was put on hold this year to be re-evaluated. The AOF grant that has provided core funding for day-to-day operations of the organization for over 15 years hasn't come through. This spring we received a one-time Transitional Grant to help cover some of our core funding for this year, but it covered significantly less than the AOF historically has. Needless to say we are running a deficit this year as a result. With the new provincial budget coming out recently and Laura having a phone call with Ag Minister Dreeshen, she is optimistic that some version of core funding will be available again in the next government fiscal year.

Also, this coming March we will be looking for 4 new Directors as there are 4 that are at the end of their terms, each having completed 2, three-year terms and are not eligible for re-election. Please consider becoming a director as clearly the 4 that are leaving have enjoyed it, seeing as they stuck around for 6 years. Please join me in thanking the outgoing directors Tamara Garstin, Andy Hart, Morrie Goetjen, and Sean LaBrie for their service these past 6 years. Also, while I am in the mode of saying thanks, please thank our staff; Laura Gibney and Sonja Bloom, the next time you see them as they both do a wonderful job of running the day to day operations and organizing us board members.

I recently read a book by Ben Hartman called the Lean Farm which talks about taking lean manufacturing techniques and applying them to a farming operation. The basic idea of lean manufacturing is to reduce labour and increase business efficiency. Ben Hartman runs a very small farm in Illinois; just a couple of acres of gardens and greenhouses and makes a pretty decent living. His book does have a heavy greenhouse and gardening influence, but there are many principles that can be applied to any size and type of agriculture operation. For starters Lean Farming looks at

organizing stuff with the idea of getting rid of the things you don't need and having the tools and supplies you do need easily accessible and easy to find. Ben then talks about going through all the processes that create value for you and analyzing the steps as to whether they create value or not. For example; seeding and harvesting a crop creates value, but spraying, watering, or fertilizing may not. Some of the steps that don't create value are necessary, but the key is to minimize the steps that don't create value or eliminate them altogether if possible. Anyway, I feel this book is worth a read for all producers.

While I am on my soap box, I figure I should share a couple things I have learned over the past year. The first is to do with moving cattle from pasture to pasture, especially a group of heifers. I have found that it takes half an hour or so to round up a group of heifers out of a pasture and to a gate and it takes another half hour to encourage them to go through the gate. What I have been doing lately is laying something just past the gate to spark the cattle's curiosity to entice that first animal through the gate. I have been using the blue pipe wrench that typically rides along on my ATV at all times and it has made going through gates much quicker. The second thing that I learned that is worth sharing has to do with putting out grass fires. The fire departments in my area are buying up leaf blowers to put out grass fires by blowing the fire back onto itself. Interesting, but I hope you never have to use this one.

Please check out the Foothills Forage website or social media for upcoming events and tell your neighbors about Regenerative Ag! I hope to see you and your neighbor at upcoming events.

Marcel Busz

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*The Busz family on the Matthias Ranch*

# For climate-smart farmers, carbon solution is in the soil



Photo: Sonja Bloom

There's a new agricultural commodity that farmers, food giants and grassroots groups are all rallying behind — carbon.

Proponents say that if the United States' 20th-century success as a global agricultural power was measured by how much food came from American soil, the 21st century offers a new paradigm: measuring how much carbon dioxide American farmers can retain in the soil while still producing food.

The two objectives are not mutually exclusive, according to farmers, scholars and ag-focused nonprofits.

They are bound together in emerging farming approaches called "carbon farming," "climate-smart farming" and "regenerative agriculture," all of which place soil, water and climate health at the center of the agricultural enterprise.

According to EPA, soil management accounted for roughly half of the agriculture sector's greenhouse gas budget in 2016, which reached 562.2 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent, or 8.6% of all U.S. emissions.

The sector also witnessed a 13% increase in emissions of its three primary climate-warming gases — nitrous oxides, methane and carbon dioxide — between

1990 and 2016, according to EPA's latest **"Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks."**

Farmers, increasingly concerned about the role climate change is having on their livelihoods, have responded in various ways. Some have curbed methane emissions from livestock production, which accounts for more than 40% of all U.S. agriculture-sector emissions.

Others have increased crop diversity and reduced the use of nitrogen-based fertilizers, effectively allowing plant-based farming's primary constituents — soil, water and seed — to interact the way nature intended them to.

But few solutions can match the practice of managing farmland for its carbon capture benefits and keeping CO<sub>2</sub> locked in soil as long as the ground surface remains unturned and plants continue absorbing CO<sub>2</sub> through photosynthesis.

Experts say "soil health + carbon capture" — the two pillars of regenerative agriculture and carbon farming — could stave off the most damaging effects of climate change on farmers, since the practices help mitigate risk from drought, flood, pests and disease.

"We call it tending to the hidden half of nature," said Elizabeth Whitlow, executive director of the Regenerative Organic Alliance, a California-based nonprofit formed in 2018 by the Rodale Institute, Dr. Bronner's and Patagonia Inc.

Among other things, the approaches seek to undo the loss of billions of tons of topsoil caused by the repetitive tilling of farm fields; to curb massive inputs of fertilizers, nitrogen, pesticides and other chemicals; and perhaps most importantly, to reverse the soil carbon cycle, where instead of absorbing and storing hundreds of

millions of tons of carbon dioxide, tilled soil becomes a net emitter of CO<sub>2</sub>.

"With only about 60 years of topsoil remaining at current practices, nothing less will do," states the Rodale Institute, where the term "regenerative organics" was coined in the late 1980s to reflect a more holistic approach to what was then called "sustainable agriculture."

The Regenerative Organic Alliance is one of a handful of groups developing new farmer and food certification programs that will impose standards for managing soil health as well as animal welfare and social fairness.

The alliance claims nearly 50 members to date, including Horizon Organic of Broomfield, Colo.; Nature's Path Foods of Blaine, Wash.; and Patagonia Provisions, the food and beverage company started by Patagonia founder and philanthropist Yvon Chouinard.

## **Milestones for regenerative agriculture**

Whereas organically grown products began as a niche market that over years became part of the American mainstream, "regenerative agriculture" is resonating with food producers large and small because consumers are demanding products that are not just good for their bodies but good for the broader environment.

"By eating food grown in dead soils, we've eliminated many of the nutrients our bodies need to live and robbed the soil of essential organic carbon," said Whitlow. "By reversing that cycle, we can increase the soil's ability to hold water, improve soil structure, and enhance microbial activity that helps make nutrients available to plant roots."

In what many viewed as a key milestone, the Minneapolis-based food giant General Mills in March committed to help

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# Producers pay attention to body condition



Photo: Sonja Bloom

Beef producers across Canada appreciate the benefits of keeping cows and heifers and even feeder cattle in good condition, particularly over winter, for a variety of production and economic reasons.

With cold temperatures and winter rations it can take a lot of feed to improve animal condition over the winter feeding period, so many aim to have cattle in good shape heading into fall. Borrowing a bit from the Goldilocks school of management for optimum performance you don't want cattle too thin or too fat — it's recommended that somewhere in the middle is just right.

And what is good condition? Most producers understand the concept of Body Condition Scoring (BCS) — which on the Canadian BCS system ranks cattle on a scale from one to five (one being thin, five being fat). The U.S. has a wider scale ranking cattle on a scale of one to nine. There is plenty of good information on

the internet describing body condition scoring. And the Beef Cattle Research Council has developed a [video that explains the process on its website](#).

While each beef operation has a different approach, the message from producers is that it requires some management to keep cattle in proper condition for optimum performance, but it pays dividends.

## **Darren Bevens**

### **Deseret Ranches, Raymond, Alta.**

With largely a year-round grazing operation, Darren Bevens, general manager with Deseret Ranches in southern Alberta, says it requires more management to keep cattle in optimum condition, but allowing cattle to do most of the harvesting does save on feeding costs.

As a large commercial cow-calf operation, the ranch has followed a year-round grazing program for many years in the Chinook belt south of Lethbridge. Cow-calf pairs are on spring, summer and fall pasture right up until December and then are moved to swath grazing in January. The ranch produces straight stands of oats and triticale to be cut for swath grazing.

"Once we get into late fall we monitor cattle very closely," says Bevens. All ranch employees are properly trained in condition scoring (BCS). Deseret Ranches follows the U.S. BCS system. They aim to keep cows and heifers in the mid-range, scoring about five. (That would be

about a 2.5 to three score on the five-point Canadian BCS scale.)

The herd is monitored and visually scored "with a very practical applied system" every week during winter. If it appears that condition is slipping, particularly under severely cold and windy conditions, cattle are supplemented with good alfalfa hay.

"We just can't turn them out on swaths and assume they will do well," says Bevens. "That is a risky assumption. A wreck can happen very quickly. So we do have to watch it carefully, and supplement as needed. But compared to having cattle on full baled feed all winter it sure helps to reduce costs."

Cows and bred heifers are managed separately, he says. Bred heifers that are still growing themselves have higher nutrient requirements and may need more feed supplements over winter. "We could run the cows and heifers together but in meeting the feed requirements of the bred heifers, the cows might be overfed," he says. "So it saves on feed and costs to run them separately."

With their carefully managed system, cattle are in good condition for May calving and in good shape for rebreeding a few weeks later. "The reproductive performance is very good," says Bevens. "Like any ranch there is always room for improvement, but we have very healthy rates. But again, the whole system has to

be properly managed because it doesn't take much to fall off the edge."

## **Ross Macdonald**

### **98 Ranch Inc., Lake Alma, Sask.**

For the past dozen years, Ross Macdonald has focused on selecting cattle that perform best under the environmental conditions and feed resources they have on their southern Saskatchewan ranch.

Macdonald manages the 75 per cent native and 25 per cent tame forage pastures for a 10- to 11-month grazing season and selects, for lack of a better term, for "easy keeping" cattle. On the ranch south of Regina near the U.S. border, he runs a small herd of purebred Hereford cattle, as well as a Hereford/Angus cross commercial

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manage 1 million acres of farmland using regenerative practices.

Jerry Lynch, the company's vice president and chief sustainability officer, said General Mills wants to engage on climate protection for the climate's sake. But he also views the effort as a hedge against a future of overworked, environmentally degraded farmland that cannot meet the company's demand for grains and other staple foods.

"As a food company, we take the output of Mother Nature in farming communities and we transform it into products that meet consumers' needs for nutrition," Lynch said during an interview late last year at General Mills' headquarters. "If factors on the front end of that business model break down, our business model becomes much more expensive, and in some cases might be disrupted."

Few would argue that this year's near-record floods along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers have not damaged American farmers and the food industry at large. Just in May, the Upper Mississippi was reopened to barge traffic after an extended closure due to flooding and ice jams.

Millions of acres of flood-damaged farm fields have also delayed the planting of much of the U.S. corn crop this year, driving insecurity for farmers already strapped by low commodity prices and a trade war with China. The pain is being felt by grain distributors, too, many of whom have been unable to ship bulk ingredients to food producers.

Regenerative or carbon farming practices also apply to livestock grazing, where a recent study of a 3,400-acre Georgia beef farm showed that the conversion of annual cropland to perennial pasture, along with holistic grazing and good soil health practices, resulted in the farm's cattle sequestering more carbon than they produced over their lives.

The farm, White Oak Pastures, is a primary supplier of EPIC Provisions, a meat snack manufacturer and subsidiary of General Mills. EPIC was the first company to have a food product certified as regeneratively sourced under the Land to Market Ecological Outcome Verification (EOV) program created by the Savory Institute of Boulder, Colo.

### **Looking to 'optimize environmental services while still growing food'**

The concept is also percolating with grassroots groups, according to officials at the American Farmland Trust, one of the nation's oldest and most influential

farmland conservation organizations.

John Piotti, AFT's president since 2016, said the organization has broadened its efforts beyond protecting millions of acres of U.S. farmland from development to engaging farmers in conversations about agriculture's role in providing environmental services like carbon capture.

But it isn't always an easy sell, and farmers have traditionally had little or no incentive to manage lands for environmental services.

"When you get down to it, fundamentally, farmers are compensated to grow food," Piotti said. "If we're serious about climate change — and many farmers are serious about it — we need farming practices to be stepped up."

And that is going to require changes in attitude, policy and, ultimately, markets.

In February, AFT launched a new initiative focused on climate health that is built around three core priorities: reducing on-farm emissions; sequestering carbon in farm soils; and preventing the future conversion of farmland for other, more carbon-intensive uses such as residential, commercial or transportation development.

"Conserving farmland by the acre and soil by the inch is a powerful strategy for reducing greenhouse gases and improving productivity," states the trust's climate strategy. "Farmers and ranchers can help reverse climate change by drawing down carbon from the air through practices that sequester carbon in the soil."

AFT is also drawing the connection between climate change and farmland conversion, noting that urban sprawl is shrinking both the size and capacity of the ag sector's primary carbon sink while also driving up pressure to produce more food per acre on remaining farmland.

Piotti said those kinds of pressures will almost certainly run counter to soil health and climate goals that are central to the regenerative agriculture movement. "The way farmers view this is you can optimize environmental services while still growing food, but you can't grow enough food to make a living if you focus too much on environmental services. There has to be a balance."

Nevertheless, he said, more farmers are shifting from emissions-intensive practices like annual soil tillage and monocropping as they better understand the complex relationship between soil health, productivity, climate change and the future of American farming.

### **Federal, state governments take a cue**

And as regenerative agriculture practices become more mainstream, governments are beginning to take a cue from the private sector and consumers.

Nebraska's "Soil Health and Productivity Incentive Act," introduced in January, would provide incentives to farmers to plant cover crops and seek to "increase farmer yields and profitability through improved soil health farming practices," according to the Union of Concerned Scientists, which has tracked nearly 40 soil health bills thorough state legislatures.

In Washington, D.C., a provision in the new farm bill creates a voluntary Soil Health and Income Protection pilot program to help farmers convert less-productive cropland into acreage for absorbing and storing CO<sub>2</sub> and water. The farm bill also provides incentives for new soil carbon sequestration practices and to establish protocols for measuring soil carbon levels.

But much more needs to be done to make federal farm policy and programs align with climate health, said Karen Perry Stillerman, a senior analyst with the Union of Concerned Scientists' Food and Environment Program.

She pointed to a recent UCS report on soil health that found regenerative practices could provide immediate benefits to farmers who are already stressed by climate change, including from floods and droughts, since healthy soils absorb and retain water over long periods rather than shunting it to the nearest ditch.

"Whether or not farmers and the food industry are willing to recognize that extreme weather is a product of human climate change, they do see it happening, and they know that their soil health is part of it," Stillerman said.

*Daniel Cusick, E&E News reporter Greenwire: Monday, July 1, 2019. Original article can be found at <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1060681577>*



# Bye-bye Canada Thistle

Canada thistle is an invasive import from Europe. It is technically called *Cirsium arvense*, a prickly member of the Aster family. In the U.K., it's called creeping thistle; in New Zealand it's called Californian thistle, perhaps derived from Canada thistle. Canada thistle is also known in North America by a range of other names but none are complementary.

It may surprise you that Canada thistle is an excellent nectar producer for honey bees and that the thistle occurs in the form of distinct separate sexes, male and female. These thistle clumps or clones have deep-rooted stem-like rhizomes that spread rapidly in good soil and also serve as food reserves for the plants.

The old method of control, particularly in pastures, was to repeatedly mow them down three to four times a year in an attempt to exhaust their food reserves. Digging out the rhizomes or cultivating them only served to multiply the thistle clones. Sheep and goats are used in Europe to control thistles but cattle will on-

ly eat young, freshly cut but wilted thistles.

Before the advent of herbicides, Canada thistles and quack grass were the top farm weed enemies due to their persistent, perennial nature. The only way to control these two dauntless weed enemies in the UK was to grow a well-fertilized crop of kale (a seven-foot giant of the cabbage family) that would shade and choke out these farm enemies over a season.

When you see a clump of thistles on your cropland, roadside ditch or headland, check out the thistle's sex in late August or September. If you pull out the fuzz before it blows away, you will notice that the fuzz either has seeds attached or no seeds. No seeds mean that it's a male clone; seeds indicate a female clone. Often in the seed heads of a female plant you will find quarter-inch maggots instead of seeds. These maggots are the offspring of flies. These flies lay their eggs only in female thistle flower heads and depend on bees to carry pollen from male to female thistle flowers. No

pollen, no seeds since it's the developing seeds that feed the fly maggots which number one to three per head. The maggots are about a quarter- to a half-inch long and make excellent bait for rocky mountain fish or trout. These maggots severely reduce the seeds available in thistle patches and thus act as a fairly good biological control for seed that otherwise would be dispensed.

As you drive or speed by the local unmowed highways from Winnipeg, Man., to Dawson Creek, B.C., do you notice those white flowerlike growths in the ditches? I have seen these white-to-cream flashes on virtually every roadside ditch in prairie Canada. What's up?

Stop, get out of the vehicle, park on the road shoulder with flashers on and take a close look. What you see are bleached white Canada thistle tops. These thistles have been infected with a fungus disease called *Phoma macrostoma*. I first saw this sporadically on roadsides and ditches in Alberta in the 80s. I dug up and forwarded lots of specimens

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herd. Cow-calf pairs are out on pasture until the Saskatchewan winter settles in, usually in late December and January. Animals are then moved onto a bale grazing system, closer into the yard where there is more shelter. Cows and heifers are managed as one herd. He buys all the hay for winter bale grazing — usually a blend of wheatgrass/alfalfa or meadow brome/alfalfa hay.

“We actually use the conditions here as part of our selection process to improve and build the herd,” says McDonald. He monitors body condition of cattle closely in late fall and early winter. Anything that shows sign of slipping in condition is pulled out and eventually culled.

“December of 2016 was a good example,” he says. Cows and heifers were still out on pasture — on a good stand of stockpiled grass. Then came an early blast of winter.

“Once conditions settled down we evaluated the cattle and anything that had lost condition during that period was pulled out,” he says. Nothing was suffering, but any older cows or heifers that had slipped in condition were culled. He uses a visual body condition scoring system to evaluate cattle.

“What we are selecting for is those cattle that continue to do well on the feed we have available under the conditions we have in southern Saskatchewan,” says MacDonald. “We are looking for that handful of cattle that are genetically predisposed to do well on the least-cost forages we have available.” When they started building the herd about 16 years ago, they sought advice from other ranchers who had selected cattle to match ranch resources.

As cattle are on the early-winter stockpiled forage as well as on bale grazing, they also have access to protein mineral tubs and free-choice salt. The MacDonald herd begins calving in late May through June — about a 30-day calving period for heifers and 40 days for cows — with calves staying with their mothers until being fenceline weaned in February or March. He wants calves to be exposed to the protein tubs well before weaning so after weaning they are already familiar with the feed and supplements.

#### **Brian Pelleboer Wyoming, Ont.**

With a diversified farming operation, Brian Pelleboer says his biggest concern with his commercial cow-calf herd is to try to keep them from being over-

ing goats each day. So the beef cows clean up the haylage and silage so I can give the goats fresh feed.”

Pelleboer currently runs a herd of about 75 head of Angus/Simmental/Gelbvieh cross beef cattle and is milking about 400 head of goats, although is looking to more than double that with an expansion of the goat dairy.

“This isn’t your traditional beef operation,” he says. “I don’t have to worry about cattle being under-condition. I have to watch that they don’t get over-conditioned.”

The livestock ration, which is fed as a total mixed ration (TMR), will vary depending on the time of year and availability of feed stuffs. It can include haylage, corn silage, ryelage, oatlage, or dry distillers grain, for example, as well as dry hay and straw.

“Many of the feeds or blends are way too strong for beef cattle so I have to look at slowing it down with hay or straw,” says Pelleboer. “But with the TMR I can put together anything I want.”

He doesn’t perform a formal body condition score on the beef herd, “but subconsciously I am always watching.” If cattle are showing signs of laying down too much fat, he backs off on feed quality. He’s aware of issues that can develop particularly at calving with over-conditioned cows. With a fall calving herd, the cows aren’t getting as much exercise, the cow might be fat, and on the high-quality ration that unborn calf has also been growing and can be big, so all factors can lead to difficulty.

Pelleboer does want cows to produce a decent sized calf, because he will be raising calves to finish in about 14 months.

Over-conditioning isn’t a concern among replacement heifers as they are maintained on rented summer pasture. Although he has to manage carefully to prevent over-conditioning in the beef cattle, he says conception rates are very good. Many of the cows over a 12-month period are calving twice so they are breeding back in a timely manner.

*Author: Lee Hart—Canadian Cattlemen. Original article can be found at <https://www.canadiancattlemen.ca/2017/11/07/five-canadian-cattle-producers-on-body-condition-scoring/>*

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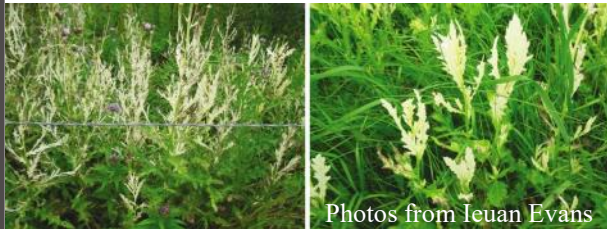
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to researchers at universities and provincial and federal governments. Eventually, around the 90s, research on this biocontrol was initiated by Agriculture and Agri-food Canada at Saskatoon. The fungus, technically identified as *P. macrostoma* var *macrostoma* reproduces by means of conidia (asexually produced spores) released from pycnidia which are dispensed by wind and water. Its conidia are somewhat similar to those of the blackleg fungus on canola. One of the *Phoma* isolates identified as *P. macrostoma* 94-44B is an isolate now registered for broadleaf weed suppression in both Canada and the U.S. The fungus has no effect on grass species, including all cereals. The fungus is primarily intended for dandelion and clover control in lawns, particularly where herbicides are banned.



Photos from Ieuan Evans

As you can see from the photographs, the odd sighting of this fungus (*Phoma macrostoma*) along prairie highways has now exploded into massed infections where up to 80 per cent per cent of the thistles in some ditches and pastures are now bleached white. The distribution of this fungus all over Europe and North America and has recently been found on thistles in New Zealand.

While I do not expect this fungus to wipe out Canada thistle or even dandelions, I can see from its distribution in this area of Alberta that we have strong bio-control of this most noxious of pests. Along with the seed maggots' natural biological control, this fungus may significantly reduce the all-too-common dense

stands of pasture and roadside Canada thistles that are still major problems for organic farmers.

Author: Ieuan Evans—Grainews.ca.

Original article can be found at:

<https://www.grainews.ca/2019/11/04/>



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This Publication is made possible by our two major funders - the Agriculture Opportunity Fund and Alberta Agriculture and Forestry.



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