

# Food Secure Canada New Farmers Initiative Report

Prairie Region - Prepared by Dana Penrice on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014

## The New Farmer Situation on the Prairies

The following organizations were interviewed to begin to establish an understanding of the new farmer situation on the Prairies.

### Manitoba:

- Small Farms Manitoba
- Harvest Moon Society

### Saskatchewan:

- Farm to Table
- Farm Land Legacies

### Alberta:

- Holistic Management
- West Central Forage Association
- Organic Alberta
- NFU – Region 7
- Alberta Chicken Producers
- Alberta Milk

In the prairie region, there are few organizations whose primary mandate is to support new farmers. Organizations may have programs or events that new farmers engage with but it is embedded within a different mandate. For example, Organic Alberta's mission is to represent the entire organic industry and new farmer programs are only a portion of the organization's work.

This information led to a conversation about the cultural difference of the prairie region in how people approach solutions for new farmers. It was observed that, for the most part, new farmers, are often not typically looking for centralized or formal programming. This is reflected in the low uptake of internship programs across the prairies. This may indicate that top-down approaches may not be successful on in the prairie cultural context.

It was identified that new farmers, while they may not be relying on organized support, are finding success through tapping into informal networks of practice. Through personal relationships, farmers are finding land, education and sometimes financial support.

Producer and commodity boards are also engaged in this issue and have various approaches to respond. Alberta Chicken Producers has incentives built into their quota leasing system, Alberta Milk has a specific New Entrants program and Alberta Beef utilizes the Canadian Cattlemen's national program.

In Alberta, the new farmer issue is becoming part of the political discussion. A 'Next Generation Council' has been established within the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and a recent report was produced. In Manitoba, because of producer and consumer pressure, a working group has been established to re-evaluate processing regulations which could assist new farmers.

New farmers are engaging online. Through YouTube and other platforms, new farmers are accessing expertise from around the world. Out of Alberta, FarmOn has developed an educational platform that has a following on the prairies but also around the world.

### **Major Regional Challenges**

The major challenge on the prairies in attracting new entrants is that outside of agriculture there is much more lucrative employment in fields like oil and gas. It has been said many times, "Why would anyone want to farm, when they could make \$100,000 per year in the oilfield?". Furthermore, even when people choose to farm, they will take an off farm job splitting their time and effort they could put into the farm business.

This economic environment has also led to soaring land prices in parts of the prairies. Many stakeholders reported how it was difficult for new farmers to access land around cities that are close enough to their market to make their farm financially viable. Land is being purchased by large farms, for recreational use, or by corporations. One stakeholder did however explain that there are opportunities for livestock production in more remote areas where land is still reasonable.

Distance is a reality on the prairies. Issues around access to the right resources or connecting to the right networks, can simply be a factor of distance. It can be isolating for new farmers who don't have a lot of support especially when they are practicing alternative approaches while surrounded by conventional farmers.

In each province, processing regulations and access to processing facilities were identified as challenges. A need to not only support new farmers but also support entrants into processing fields is important as butcher shops continue to close. Quota limit exemptions were also mentioned as new entrants attempt to scale up in supply-managed markets.

Organizations with new farmer programs also reported that funding has been a major challenge. Many can't access Growing Forward because they were excluded from eligibility but overall they reported that they are spending more and more resources on a shrinking pool of available funding sources.

### **Opportunities for Potential Work**

The NFI brought to light the lack of compiled information on the opportunities and challenges on for new farmers on the prairies. There is a significant opportunity that came to light through this project, to simply continue this research.

With regards to policy, there is an opportunity now in Manitoba to support scale-appropriate food safety regulations and use this as a model to begin policy change in other provinces. There may also come a time when there is an opportunity for a real discussion on quota exemptions for small farmers. This will need to take place at a national level.

Consultations also encouraged the need for policies based on food not commodities. Food Secure Canada is in an excellent position to push for this, as it has been doing for a number of years now.

Because of the large tracts of land on the prairies that are changing hands, there also seems to be an opportunity to develop land policies that make this process manageable for new farmers and for their families.

### **Evaluation of the NFI Process**

Bringing forward a national conversation on new farmers is no small feat and integrating it into the Food Secure Canada conference was successful in bringing people together. The schedule of the NFI roundtable however may have had limited capacity to develop meaningful connection to these issues. Because of the tight and strict timeline of the day, as a participant it felt like the 'meat of the matter' was never reached and that surface level information was presented. Methodologies for deeper exploration into new farmers issues needs to be explored and is an opportunity for where the NFI could go next.

The research process developed for the NFI project was successful in beginning to establish a national perspective of new farmer issues. The establishment of a prairie region however, instead of 3 provincial regions, limited the reporting from a large part of the country. The capacity of one lead covering 3 provinces simply could not provide a sufficiently comprehensive perspective on the situation, challenges and opportunities resulting in a limited report. This report should therefore be viewed as a sampling of

new farmer perspectives that is not representative of the region as a whole. This should be taken into account as recommended policies are developed in order that they not be based solely on regions that had more comprehensive reporting. For example, policies encouraging internships may not be applicable to the prairies.

Overall, the NFI project was valuable. It was a good to begin this much needed work for new farmers. In conversations with stakeholders, this initiative was well received and welcomed. Stakeholders were eager to engage in the process and learn about the outcomes from the NFI effort. This part of the project was the most successful and valuable. Finding ways to support continued research is required, especially in the prairie provinces.