

# Scoops

Quarterly publication of the Alberta Farm Writers' Association

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## Scoops

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## 'See the South' – CFWF 2004, Windsor, ON

The Eastern Canadian Farm Writers' Association (ECFWA) host this year's annual Canadian Farm Writers' Federation (CFWF) members to Windsor, Ontario, host city of CFWF 2004.

'See the South' is the theme of this year's conference, and with Windsor lying so close to the US border in southwestern Ontario, the theme is apt.

Two days of tours will greet conference goers, including

stops at Point Pelee National Park, the most southern point on the Canadian mainland;

Verbeke Farms in Leamington, producers of potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers and various other horticultural crops; Highline Mushroom Produce in Leamington; Jack Miner Bird Sanctuary; the Greenhouse and Processing Crops Research

Centre at Harrow; Wheatley Elevators; Abe and Dennis Dreidger Farm, large grain, tomato and oilseed producers; Ducks Unlimited's Hillman Seasonal Wetland Cell project; Pelee Island Winery, and Hiram Walker & Sons Limited distillery.

Saturday is set aside as professional development day, and the ECFWA has lined up an impressive list of speakers and presentations to keep farm writers and broadcasters talking for months.

As always, the Conference includes the CFWF Annual General

Meeting, slated for Saturday morning. Of particular interest during the Annual General Meeting will be the



agenda item dealing with the location of CFWF 2005 (see related story this page).

A hospitality suite runs each evening; and the conference wraps up with the annual Awards Banquet on Saturday night.

For more information about the conference (it's not too late to register!), check out [www.cfwf.ca](http://www.cfwf.ca), and click on the conference link.



## AFWA to bid on 2005 conference

*The AFWA will make a presentation at the CFWF Annual General Meeting in its bid to co-host CFWF 2005 with the Saskatchewan Farm Writers' Association (SFWA). Details have yet to be worked out, but interest is high within both organizations to hold the event within the two provinces – both celebrate their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2005, and that year is also the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the AFWA and CFWF.*

*If you have any presentation ideas, or would like to help with the bid proposal, please contact AFWA Secretary/Treasurer Janet Kanters, at 403-934-0570, [janetkanters@shaw.ca](mailto:janetkanters@shaw.ca). Please forward your ideas to Janet by Thursday, Sept. 23.*

## BSE – Too bad we didn't learn from the Europeans

**Will Verboven**  
**Alberta Beef Magazine**  
**Calgary, Alberta**

My recent BSE testing investigation trip to Europe proved to be both an enlightenment and a confirmation of many suspicions about the rest of the BSE story. But above all it showed how our government politicians, their "expert" bureaucrats and many Industry organizations either refuse to learn from the experience of others or just seem blissfully oblivious to what has happened elsewhere.

There isn't really another explanation for the way governments and their agencies reacted to the BSE out-breaks in North America. Interestingly some of those same folks like to point out with some pride that they learned from Europe by en-forcing feed bans years ahead of anyone else. But along with that step seems to have come a denial attitude that BSE could never occur in North America.

Perhaps that is the reason our authorities felt that we are "unique" and must do it "our way" when it did break out. That approach has been a tragedy for the cattle Industry and it is being perpetuated by officials refusing to even recognize that they have made mistakes – it is after all a matter of ego. So much for the philosophic undertones to what I found in Europe.

I traveled to three countries – Switzerland, Ireland and the Netherlands. I met with numerous people involved

with BSE research, private BSE laboratories, packing plants and test development manufacturing. I was impressed with their willingness to tell me literally everything. But I was even more amazed that none of these people or organizations had ever been visited by government or industry officials from North America prior to or after the BSE outbreak.

I was told that in most European countries (except the UK) there was severe BSE denial by governments before and after the first outbreaks. I was told government officials argued against mandatory testing of OTM animals as statistically unnecessary and that using BSE testing for marketing purposes was inappropriate, precedent setting and would stoke consumer fears. Sounds familiar – this was years before our "unique" BSE outbreak.

We have all heard the tiresome harangues against mandatory BSE testing and testing for marketing purposes. Allegations are made that tests costs up to \$300 each and take a week for results, and that the packing industry can't possible handle the logistics or costs. Well that is probably true if the governments own costs to do a test are used. However, in Europe they took the revolutionary step of letting private enterprise provide the BSE test diagnostic service.

Competition, rapid tests, lab

automation, economies of scale and other efficiencies (none of which occurs in government labs) has driven the cost to about \$20 per test with results within 6 hours. I saw the process first hand at a private lab in Ireland. New BSE tests have been approved that will see results in 100 minutes and further drive down the costs.

I observed the extraction of the obex brain tissue at two packing plants. It did not interfere at all with the production line as the heads were already removed. Test results were received back at the plant by the time the carcasses were cooled. Packers support testing for whatever purpose because they feel it helps trade and soothes consumer fears.

BSE testing for marketing purposes has had mixed results in Europe. It did help re-open borders that were closed between European countries (sounds familiar again) but few chain stores have continued with testing as a marketing tool. That's

because consumer concern and interest faded, and the extra cost was no longer justified. MacDonald's in Europe remains one of the few retailers that promotes their beef as being BSE tested.

BSE research in Europe was both scary and hopeful. Dutch research using discoveries from scrapie studies may, with more refined diagnostic procedures, find BSE in the lympho-reticular system. That's ominous, but could be dealt with by testing younger animals. In another situation, a private Swiss company felt they were two years away from a BSE vaccine.

Looking back is always 20/20, but admitting mistakes and learning from others, in my view, is 40/40. The Europeans have shown that the energy and sting can be taken out of the BSE crisis. If the present attitudes and positions of North American governments on BSE is any indication, they are years away from that revelation.



## Environmental Stewardship winner just wants to talk about grass

**Contributed by  
Peggy Strankman, CCA**

It's a known fact that the winner of the national Environmental Stewardship Award is passionate about the native grass on his ranch.

It's that care and attention that earned Ted and Olive Perrin, their daughter Pam and her husband Neil Danroth the ninth annual award presented August 19 at the Canadian Cattlemen's Association (CCA) Semi-Annual Meeting and Convention in Calgary. Generously supported by Merial Canada (Ivomec), the Environmental Stewardship Award is presented each year to a Canadian cattle producer doing a particularly outstanding job of caring for the environment.

Castleland Ranch is primarily a cow-calf operation in the brown soil zone on primarily native grass in provincial

grassland and supports about 320 cow/calf pairs, 60 heifers, and 20 bulls. The ranch markets steer calves, bred heifers, bulls, and grass-fed beef.

The ranch supports herds of ungulates and occasionally ringneck pheasants.

Various species of grassland songbirds, such as the Baird's Sparrow, migrate to the area to nest in the native grasslands and coulees. Golden Eagles and Prairie Falcons are year-round residents nesting in the badland landscape along Lake Diefenbaker. Huge flocks of waterfowl and shorebirds provide spectacular viewing as they stage on Lake Diefenbaker during their spring and autumn migrations.

Drought is a fact of life in the management of Castleland Ranch. Developing reliable sources of water and leaving

substantial amounts of carry-over of forage resource from year to year is essential for buffering the negative consequences of dry years.

The national Environmental Stewardship Award winner is selected from the winners of stewardship awards presented by provincial cattle associations.

Other nominees this year were Ray and Mae Van Steinburg of Cranbrook, BC, Edith Wearmouth, Cochrane, Alberta, and Mark and Carol Wilson of New Liskeard, Ont.

*For further information:*

*Ted Perrin, Castleland Ranch  
306-859-4925*

*Peggy Strankman, Canadian  
Cattlemen's Association  
403-275-8558*



## Member news:

**Les Brost** and Dr. Jerome Martin are finishing work on the Bridge-Builder Project. Done under contract with REDA, the project was designed to begin the process of building communication links between rural and urban Albertans. "We are using a new process in public consultation, and thus far we are very pleased with the outcomes," notes Brost. "We were able to identify common and diverging interests of rural and urban Albertans relating to rural renewal. While we ended up with some surprising results, the end result is very good news for rural Alberta."

*Les Brost: sostar@telusplanet.net*

**Jennifer Cockrall-King** recently contributed to The Food Lover's Guide to Canada, which is being published by Formac Publishing in Halifax. The publication is a guide to the best local fare in cities, towns and villages across Canada. It will be available in October.

Cockrall-King and **Terry Juzak** are also working on their third issue of The Edible Prairie Journal. They now boast close to 300 paid subscriptions.

*Jennifer Cockrall-King:  
jennifer@foodgirl.ca*

*Terry Juzak: terry@edibleprairie.ca*

In July, **Dave Corry**, wife Tanya and their two young sons moved to Red Deer. Dave recently accepted employment with NuFarm Agriculture as the sales rep for Northern Alberta.

*Dave Corry: images@filmfarm.ca*

**Janet Kanters** recently accepted a position with Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development's Business Management Innovations Branch as a researcher, writer and editor. Kanters also continues to accept freelance writing, editing and photography assignments.

*Janet Kanters: janetkanters@shaw.ca*

## Perspective...

*By Claudette Lacombe*

I went to the Confronting Water Scarcity Conference in July at Lethbridge University and, because I always want to be amidst the action, I stayed in the University residence. I shared a room with a woman from Spirit River, so we each came with completely different background information and perspectives.

I learned a great deal at this large and comprehensive water management conference, made some interesting connections and, as usual, came away with questions about what Alberta and Canada will do to ensure safe, secure water supplies.

I took great pleasure in the presentations from Calgary and Okotoks. I work predominately with producers and rural citizens so I really enjoyed hearing about the work these municipalities do to reduce water consumption and pollution.

The conference also offered a session about a seed bank in Ethiopia. That was an eye opener. I'm so accustomed to working with local farmers that I forget how high-tech we are and how easy (?) the land is to work on the Canadian prairie. I forget sometimes that farmers in other countries face very different conditions, tech availability and information/workshop style education programs. We have no excuse in Canada to lag behind available knowledge and technology use in agriculture.

Joel Bruneau of Saskatchewan reinforced just how difficult it's going to be to put a price on water. Actually, I heard that a few times at the conference and couldn't agree more. I can't remember who said, "We tend not to give water value until we develop it," but it's too true. We need to move away from that idea.

Perhaps the most valuable point I came home with is that there is a huge community working on water management issues in Alberta, and we need every one of them.



## Our fragile food supply

*The capacity of the world's commercial agriculture to produce sufficient food faces some severe tests*

**By Dennis Keeney**

Food is full of paradoxes. Currently there is enough produced to adequately feed the 6 billion people on the planet. Yet nearly a billion are underfed. In the rich United States, 35 million people, including nearly 13 million children, experience hunger or the threat of hunger. Yet at least that many Americans are obese.

The best land in America produces two low-value commodity crops that are rarely directly consumed by humans – corn and soybeans. They are used instead for animal feed and increasingly for biomass fuel, such as ethanol.

Commodity-driven agriculture brings many ills – economic, environmental and social. The short list includes soil erosion and depletion, nitrogen fertilizer contamination of drinking water, fouled lakes and rivers, damage to the Gulf of Mexico's fisheries, pesticide contamination and feedlot pollution. Often not considered: the loss of farms because government programs favor consolidation and ever-larger farm operations, and the destruction of Third World agriculture, which can't compete against the subsidized farmers of rich nations.

Rather than address these problems, federal farm and export programs worsen them while costing taxpayers billions of dollars.

Consider these further challenges:

- Water shortages for irrigation are becoming common worldwide because of poor water use and increased agricultural, urban and Industrial demand. While irrigated farming is practiced on about 20 percent of the world's agricultural land, it produces more than 40 percent of the food.
- Animal diseases threaten meat, milk and egg supplies, and plant diseases threaten to decimate corn and soybean production.
- Land continues to revert to deserts or is covered in concrete. Soil erosion removes more soil than is formed. Most threatening over the long term is climate change that within 50 years will greatly change agriculture in the Midwest.
- China's huge and expanding economy is sucking in grain, posing a further challenge to our food supply. Last year saw a continued decline in worldwide grain stockpiles in spite of increasing production. Coarse grain stocks are now the lowest in three decades, with only about a 50-day supply (70 days is considered necessary for food security).
- Short of global apocalypse from disease or war, the world economy will continue to expand, and population,

especially in the Third World, will continue to grow. An increasingly affluent population that demands diets high in animal protein will require more grain to produce more animal products.

- More food will not come from more land because, aside from fragile lands in Brazil, there is little new land left to exploit. New technologies will help, but we have peaked on the benefits of many of them. The green leaf can convert only so much energy to carbohydrates and proteins.

If these problems coalesce, there is the strong possibility that the food supply cannot be sustained. Food shortages, dramatic increases in food costs, lowered exports and worldwide pressure on food supplies could result. Food could become a precious commodity, with adequate supplies available only to rich nations. How the world responds to the global challenges in food supply will be critical.

Adoption of healthy diets based on less animal protein, lower energy use throughout the economy, and policies to help build strong rural communities and promote farming methods that protect the environment would help. However, such changes are difficult and likely would come slowly. They require research,

public involvement and major reversals in federal policies. Moreover, they require us to think big rather than working on small, disjointed half solutions.

Equally important, the United States and other food-rich nations must redouble their support of food self-sufficiency in food-short nations of Asia and Africa. Lessons learned from the Green Revolution must be applied. Neither food sufficiency nor ecological sustainability can be achieved by exporting inappropriate western technologies.

Agriculture has served the world in the past and it will do so in the future. Now is the time to make decisions to ensure sustainability. The welfare of our grandchildren demands no less.

*Dennis Keeney, former director of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University, is now emeritus professor there and senior fellow at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.*

