

Just Farmers: an informal agricultural newsletter

Vol. I, No.7

May 1, 2014

We affirm and attempt to:

- Practice good soil-care. We think of the soil as an organism, and work to feed our soil as a complex web of life, not as a mine for crops. *People who want to build muscle mass may eat huge steaks or, unfortunately, use growth enhancers. Soil, like the human body, is not a list of ingredients, but a complex of interrelationships.* (Please see the note immediately below.)

News:

- The subject above reminds me of a story about a man who returned to his doctor's office to complain that he was feeling poorly and weak, "even though I have followed your advice about the vitamin pills, Doc." The doctor asked about his diet, and he replied, "You mean you have to *eat* when you take vitamin pills?"
- Dave Conway (recently moved to Victoria, leaving behind the austerity of wilderness for the fleshpots of gentility) had this follow-up comment about the quotation from HRH Charles which was in our last issue: "In about 1982, Prince Charles had 'come out' in favour of organic farming and was receiving a lot of criticism for his stand. I was living in England at that time and was working on organic farms so I thought I would write a letter to HRH supporting him. And I got a reply! Sure, it was from his secretary, but she said Prince Charles was appreciative of the support."
- Some readers asked about the photo of the border collie and the hen. "What happened to the hen?" Here is the contextual shot, showing HRH and Camilla watching the demonstration in which the border collie was

successful in herding chickens. But we don't know if the hen ever recovered.



Highlights from the Annual Meeting of the Smithers Farmers Institute

- The meeting was held at Glenwood Hall on April 23, 2014. Helping with registration were Megan Shuhyta and Danika Johnstone, the youngest and some of the most dedicated members of the group.
- Jenn Hegan reported from the Ground-breakers' Co-operative. The new Food Directory is almost finished with small amounts of interest shown in Houston or Hazelton, but about the same number of suppliers as before. One thousand copies will be available soon. They are placed strategically around the area and often are cited as useful in finding producers.
- Paul Davidson reported on F.A.R.M. which stands for **F**ood and **A**griculture **R**esponsibility **M**ember. This organization represents agricultural groups involved in community agriculture: farmers institutes, organic growers, sheep, goats, bees, etc.
- (*Once I served on the board of CTS which was under the supervision of CRCNA and in turn was related to the CEP and the CIW.*)



Paul's speech was nowhere near that confusing, but still a challenge to keep the acronyms straight.)

-Very important changes in legislation will be coming in the form of a new Water Act and proposals about the Agricultural Land Reserve. The Farm Community Council is working hard to support members from the Interior region. ("Anything other than the Okanagan the Lower Mainland tends to get ignored.")

-We have a very active representative on this committee named Dennis LaPierre who is a sheep farmer and who advocates for our region, including the organic sector.

-Mr. LaPierre would like input from farmers; Paul Davidson will send the email link to the SFI membership.

- John Stevenson, our regional agronomist, reported that he has served one year in office.

-John is spearheading an Industry Capacity Building project along Highway 16 as a pilot project for the whole province. When finished, this will have all sorts of information located in one place for ease of access for farmers. For example, John is working on finding all the agricultural records for the region, the Factsheets, InfoBasket, harvest data, climate and soils data, etc.: everything but the location of Shangri-La. (*One member thinks that Quick is the location of Shangri-La.*)

-John also attended two workshops: one on alfalfa and the other on soil fertility. John reported that the conversations at coffee time contained a great deal of experiential, local information that even the best of speakers didn't have. One example is this: Leroy Taylor wondered if the longevity of alfalfa stands might be related to naturally-occurring arsenic in the soils east of Decker Lake. (*John's comments about local knowledge fits in very well with the intention of this newsletter.*)

-John is also trying to get more local crop trials going. One member is growing tiny plots of grains and John would like someone to try sainfoin. Industry's requirements for weed-free straw for erosion control could be a huge, locally produced and profitable agricultural commodity. One challenge is sourcing clean seed, and another challenge is starting with very clean weed-free ground which might require a pretty potent herbicide treatment(s) and/or several mechanical tillage treatments.

-Good news: Terrace is working at re-establishing a Farmers Institute. The Haida Gwaii Farmers Institute (Tlell) is also active and in contact with John.

-John reports that we might be able to get some help dealing with our soils' acidulation under climate change adaptation and mitigation funding programs. We would need calcium trials. At present, CaCO₃ costs \$300/tonne from Vanderhoof. We need to address this at some point.

- Megan d'Arcy reported on three main topics.
 1. The Environmental Farm Plan is in its second year as one of the programs under the Growing Forward 2 agreement. This time around there will be no funding for "standard farming practices," such as safe fuel storage. There will be no funding for elk fences. (*Relocating some elk to Abbotsford may be an idea.*)
- Things that are being funded under the EFP program include moving confined livestock areas, looking after riparian, off-stream watering, energy efficiency, composting, etc. The EFP process is still free, voluntary and confidential. Some regulation changes are occurring (or have occurred) in the Water Act, Open Burning Regulations, Fisheries Act, Agriculture Waste Control Regulations, and Weed Act. Contact Don Russell (Terrace) or Megan D'Arcy (Telkwa) for more information.

2. On behalf of the Machinery Committee, Megan proposed designating funds to purchase several items for members to rent. One pressing need is for turkey crates; others might include cattle panels, small harrows (pull-behind for quads to serve horse owners). \$3000 was allocated. Several members volunteered space to store the SFI's equipment.

3. Megan reported on the recent workshop about Grass Fed Beef. It was well-attended and many attenders found it helpful. The leader, Jim Limtott, was able to be detailed and well-informed while understanding the difference between Manitoba (his home region) and the need to modify practices for our region and distance from large markets. His market includes Winnipeg, perhaps 700,000 people. (*Prince George is miniscule by comparison.*)

-Those in attendance were a diverse crowd, not only beef producers. They were challenged to think about this sentence: "What is your unfair advantage" (in the Bulkley Valley)? This translates as "What is your unique strength as a growing region?"

- Leroy Taylor has the privilege of announcing that the new name on the plaque honouring people for contributions to agriculture is that of Symon Koldyk. SFI's pleasure at honouring Symon is tempered by Symon's untimely death. All who know Symon honour and miss him.

-Just after this presentation, Leroy Taylor announced: "I have glysohate." (*When I read this in my notes, I thought, "So what, Leroy, I have ingrown toenails."*)

- Mannfred Wittwer led the group in election of new executive officers and board members. There were no attack ads used by any of the successful candidates and all received 100% of the votes cast. Here they are: President—Paul Davidson; Vice-President: Matt Taylor; Secretary—Danika Johnstone; a treasurer will be selected at the next board meeting. The Board of Directors includes—besides those just chosen—Megan

d'Arcy; Al Brandsma; Leah Sheffield; Bryan Swansburg; Daniel Vandenberg.

- Mr. Al Brandsma was thanked for his faithful service as President of the SFI.
- After adjournment, several members were trying to read various papers but failed due to insufficient light. (*Glenwood Hall take note: Going green is good, but so is visibility.*)
- Readers of this newsletter who are SFTI members will receive a complete set of the official minutes (*without asides and with more information*) from Leah Sheffield.

The History Department
by Doug Boersema
based upon *Interior New* articles

"The Bulkley Valley Farmers' Institute" is the oldest in the north, established in 1912. The first President was Roy Williams. He operated an up-to-date farm at Round Lake up until 1921 when he moved to the U.S. The first secretary was T. J. Thorpe who was a businessman in Telkwa. The business of the organization at the start was buying stumping powder and later on selling hay and other farm products. In one year it sold over \$30,000 worth of hay for its members. It continued until 1920 when the Northern Interior Cooperative Association was formed and the Institute was allowed to lapse.

When the new organization proved a failure the farmers were ready to go back to the Institute, which was reorganized in 1922 with fifty-six members and has been active since that time. At one time the Institute covered the entire valley but it was soon learned that this was too much territory to give satisfactory service to its members. Consequently, a few years later other Institutes were formed at Smithers, Quick, Evelyn and Houston.

Follow-up: Mistral Gris Meat Birds:
Comments by a Local Farmer

by Megan D'Arcy
Unity Farm and Gardens

Over the winter we raised 50 Mistral Gris meat birds (the Mistral Gris is a derivative of the



Barred Rock chicken). We commonly raise about 400 Cornish Giants for farm-gate sales and for sale at the Farmers' Market, so this was an experiment.

I was interested in how the Mistral Gris would finish. I particularly wanted to know how long it would take, the meat-to-bone ratio, fat cover, taste and texture. Overall we found that the Mistral Gris were easy to raise. After the first few weeks they seemed very hardy when compared to the Cornish Giants. They would make *excellent* pasture birds.



The beginning

We finished the birds in about 14 weeks (but that is over winter). We found that the finished product did look different than the plump roaster you get with the Cornish Giant, but that the meat to bone ratio is still acceptable. The roosters finished out at around 5lbs; the hens were smaller (between 3 ½ - 4lbs). The Mistral Gris seemed to have very strong bones.

I usually do our chickens in the slow cooker (so that I can prepare it in the morning). We cooked one of the Mistral Gris birds last night and found the flavour to be excellent.



Cotswold Sheep: A Minor Breed with Great Potential

by Richard and Donna Shepherd, Big Lake, B.C.

Being very interested in conserving some of the old breeds of farm animals we looked at Rare Breeds Canada to decide which breed of sheep would suit us best. We wanted something that would be gentle around our grandchildren and touchable, something that produced both good meat and wool. We needed a sheep that could handle cold winters and hot summers and one that could thrive on a diet of mainly hay and grass.

The Cotswold is proving to be just this type of sheep.

We are hoping to be able to sell the wool to crafters throughout BC. Cotswold wool is long and curly: quite beautiful, actually. If you look up the history of the Cotswold their wool was a very important commodity for the British. Right now we are in the process of learning what to do with the wool when it comes off the sheep, starting from scratch. A man comes up from 100 Mile House to do the shearing and then we want to handle the rest. Although right now most of our sheep are white we are well on our way into coloured wool with a grey ram, a brown ewe and a new little silver grey ewe lamb.

Being rare, the Cotswold sheep were not easy to find here in BC. Very fortunately for us, we came across Martha, a lovely lady in Pender Island who also loves this breed of sheep and has been more than helpful in getting us started. We bought our first few sheep from her and shortly afterwards lost two to a transient cougar.

She encouraged us and immediately made two more available to us. To prevent another tragedy of that sort we keep all our animals locked up at night and let them out during the day. Because we work on such a small scale, having only ten acres, we are able to do this. This same lady provided us with young rams late last fall and three bred ewes early this year.



We have purchased a few more from her as well, and now have a total of fifteen Cotswold sheep, two rams and thirteen ewes ranging from newborn to one retired lady. We feel very happy to have this older lady as she was born in Ontario at the Rare Breeds Conservancy so is sort of a reminder of what we are working towards.



Being watched while at play



That grey and white thing in the back is definitely NOT a Cotswold