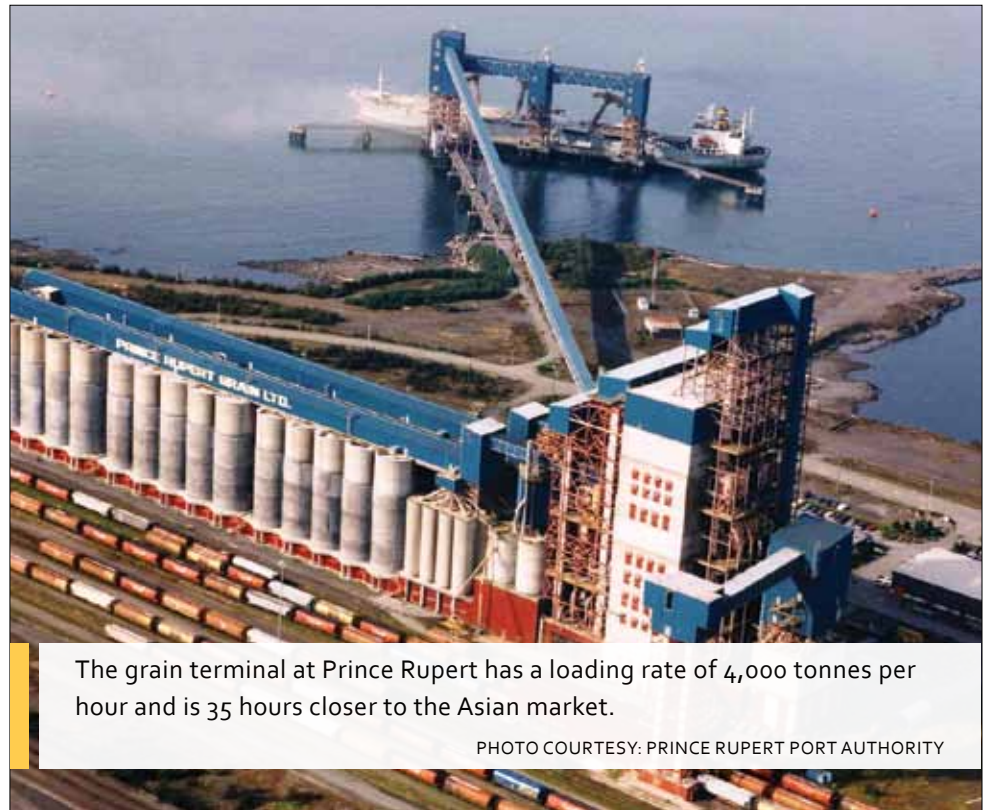


Ag Minister Evan Berger talks growth



Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Evan Berger is also MLA for Livingstone-Macleod in Southern Alberta.

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The grain terminal at Prince Rupert has a loading rate of 4,000 tonnes per hour and is 35 hours closer to the Asian market.

PHOTO COURTESY: PRINCE RUPERT PORT AUTHORITY

BY ANNE-MARIE BRUZGA LUCHAK

Agriculture today is probably the most exciting it has been in the last 40 years," says Evan Berger, Alberta's new Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Berger says now is the time to capitalize on new growth opportunities. He has a keen interest in developing Alberta's terminal at Prince Rupert, drawing more youth into agriculture, and finding a way to meet the needs of Alberta's diverse agriculture sector. His belief in Alberta's agricultural viability comes from first-hand experience.

A third-generation farmer, Berger has a mixed farm and ranching operation southwest of Nanton. While he's done a lot of custom work and rented land in the past, he has downsized since taking on the agriculture portfolio. Still, he maintains around 120 cows and—while he's put a lot of the farmland back into hay—he still seeds around 400 acres to grains and oilseeds.

With his ag background, it is no surprise that Berger considers his recent appointment a great honour.

"We have some of the foremost producers in the world and I am very proud to have this opportunity," says Berger. "I will do everything I can to further the cause of agriculture to help it become a rival to oil and gas as our province's biggest industry sector."

Part of growing Alberta's agriculture industry is helping farmers prepare for the *Marketing Freedom for Grain Farmers Act*, which goes into effect on Aug. 1, 2012. The province is currently hosting a series of grain marketing information sessions to update farmers.

Market access related to these changes is a specific concern the minister has heard about from producers in Northern Alberta.

"Really, the challenge up there is the short piece of railway that is missing from Grand Prairie straight over to Prince Rupert," he says. "The opportunity to utilize the port at Prince Rupert more and offer a shorter transportation route to those in the north of the province is something we need to jump on."

Berger explains that the Alberta-owned terminal at Prince Rupert is not only 35 hours closer to the Asian market than any other Western Canadian port, but can be used in a far greater capacity.

"That terminal is phenomenal," says Berger. "It has the capacity to process 4,000 tonnes an hour of cleaning and

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- Evan Berger

4,000 tonnes an hour of loading, and can store more ship loads than pretty much any other terminal in the country. I think there are plenty of opportunities there and we just need to be cautiously optimistic as we work through the logistics."

Berger adds that the majority of grain farmers he's spoken with are enthusiastic about the new marketing system. Likewise, he believes it's going to open up many opportunities. If these changes result in greater profitability, he also believes there could be the added benefit of attracting youth back into agriculture.

"The average age of an Alberta farmer is 51 years old," he says. "We need to get youth back into agriculture. It has to be

attractive, it has to be profitable, and there have to be new changes and ideas."

Part of making the industry more profitable involves securing trade opportunities. Berger sees farmers as having a large role to play in trade by being advocates for their products. He believes it's time to more actively promote Alberta's agriculture industry.

"We in Alberta—in Canada—don't blow our own horn enough," says Berger. "We have safe, high-quality products. We have a very good reputation in the world. We need to make sure we don't shy away from letting people know that."

Berger also believes the numbers back up this positive messaging

"Profitability is moving in our direction," says Berger. "As we move forward to 2050, there will be nine billion people and only about six countries in the world that will be able to produce more than they consume. That is looking good for agriculture. Now, how do we make sure we position ourselves as not just a global supplier, but the preferred global supplier."

Part of ensuring farmers will have the infrastructure to meet this new global reality means that all of rural Alberta has internet access. Currently, 30 per cent of rural Alberta has no internet service because of sparse population or topography challenges. In conjunction with Service Alberta Minister Manmeet Bhullar, Berger is working toward getting these unserved areas—typically those that are unprofitable for private industry—served.

"It is imperative that our rural children, and rural ag producers, have access," says Berger. "We do not want to compete with the private sector whatsoever, but we do want to enable everyone to get online. And for agricultural producers—it's a huge part of their business opportunity now."

Berger was also involved in the Property Rights Taskforce, which travelled around the province listening to the diverse viewpoints on what constitutes property and how to balance property rights with maintaining stewardship of the land. During the process, he was asked to define a property right.

"I thought about that long and hard," he says. "The ultimate property right is something that one produces—whether it be intellectual or physical, it's your product. You have your crop of wheat, you sell it ... that is your property right. Actual land outlives all of us. It's fixed in place and we can't take it with us."

"We have to be forward looking into the fact that in the last 40 years in Canada, we have lost 50 per cent of our arable land per capita," says Berger. "The planning aspect and the property rights issues have to be dealt with and we have to deal with them in a calm, rational way to guarantee that agriculture has a future in Alberta."

Looking forward, the minister says he will continue to meet with major external commodity boards and members of the agriculture sector, allowing the industry to drive his priorities. He will also find new ways to engage youth in agriculture, such as holding a youth summit to capitalize on these exciting changes in the ag industry.

"I think that we are on the cusp of seeing a whole different mindset for agriculture and I'm looking forward to it," says Berger. "And I think we have plenty of opportunity going forward. We have the third highest amount of arable land per capita in the world. We follow only Australia—with no water—and Kazakhstan—with no transportation. Opportunities abound."

■ Anne-Marie Bruzga Luchak is the editor of Barley Country.