

Farming on the philosophy of efficiency

by Robyn St-Hilaire
If there's one word that defines the philosophy of producer David Eaton, it's efficiency.

Basing decisions on efficiency has helped the Eaton Farm Company Ltd.—no connection to the Eaton's department store—successfully operate since Eaton took over the farm 20 years ago.

"It used to be that I wanted to be the most productive producer in the area, but as I've matured and watched market forces, my philosophy changed to wanting to be the most productive producer while keeping costs down," says Eaton.

Eaton's risk-averse attitude in a risk-rich profession is partly based on the location of his 1,700 hectare (4,200 acre) farm—19 kilometres east and 12 kilometres north of Oyen,

which is traditionally a dry area.

"We haven't had any run off for two years and it's not likely to change this year, with 70 per cent of the province experiencing below-average moisture levels in the soil," he says.

Market and weather conditions keep Eaton true to grains—he grows wheat, lentils, canola, peas and Metcalfe barley.

"I normally have 200 hectares (500 acres) of Metcalfe. The protein is usually too high for malt but it provides a good bushel weight for feed, making it worth the investment," he says.

Indeed, Eaton's had considerable success with barley. Early in the 1990s, he netted an **Alberta Barley Commission** yield competition award for achieving 107 bushels of AC Lacombe barley per acre, 259 per cent above Statistics Canada's average yield for the area.

Eaton's also faced tough times, such as shutting down the farm's hog operation, which ran from 1969 to 1998.

"My father and uncle started the hog operation. We'd grow grain for the hogs and take their manure to fertilize the fields to grow more grain. It was a good cycle.

Philosophically, I was torn, but I had to end it for financial survival," Eaton explains.

Eaton was prepared to embrace straight grain farming, but his wife, Cynthia, who'd helped run the hog operation, felt that being on a farm without animals wasn't right. She acquired seven Red Angus Cross cattle in 2000 and today the farm is home to 70 head.

"Now I agree that you can't have a farm without livestock," Eaton says. "The waste from grains can maintain a cattle herd with-



out costing much and having cattle on fields means no yardage costs. Plus, we feed the cows where we want the manure, making it easier to manipulate nutrients."

In addition to farming, Eaton is a part of several organizations which he says are good for personal development.

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"I became a delegate for the **(Alberta Barley) Commission** after I attended their AGM to receive my yield competition award, but I first became involved with them in the 1990s when I did a demonstration plot project of nine barley varieties to determine the best variety for hogs. Research is a good way to manage risk and save money," he says.

Eaton is the chairman of the Chinook Applied Research Association (CARA), a board member of the Applied Research and Extension Council of Alberta and a board member and past president of the Big Country Agricultural Society.

He's also part of the East Sounding Creek 4H club,

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—Photo by Diana Walker—

something each of his four children—Hope, 21, Meredith, 19, Amy, 17, and Seth, 15—have been involved with. As well, he's a private licensed pilot who owns three planes and flies as a hobby.

But efficiency is never far from Eaton's mind. Even his dream house, built in the 1990s, was an extension of his philosophy.

"We used Styrofoam insulation and angled the roof to eventually accommodate solar cells," he says.

"Efficiency just makes sense."

Photo and story courtesy Alberta Barley Commission

