

More ag research dollars needed

Farmers unite to call for investment in agriculture research

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The Grain Farmers of Ontario, the Fédération des producteurs de culture commerciales du Québec, the Atlantic Grains Council and the Grain Growers of Canada recently announced they are uniting to form Farmers for Investment in Agriculture (FIA), to demand greater investment in agronomic research from the federal government.

This group of four major agricultural organizations and their affiliates represents over 100,000 farmers from across the country.

"Agriculture as an industry turns every dollar of research investment into a 10 dollar economic benefit for Canada through the growth of the domestic food sector, increased exports and lower food costs," says William Van Tassel, vice chair of the Fédération des produc-

teurs de culture commerciales du Québec.

At a time when most industrialized countries are making huge investments in farming to capitalize on growing world food demand, public research funding for agronomics in Canada has dropped 40 per cent since 1994 after adjusting for inflation, resulting in a serious loss of both research infrastructure and scientists.

Farmers for Investment is asking the government to double core agronomic research over the next 10 years, which, by 2020 would bring funding back to 1994 levels.

They believe doing this would help Canadian farmers gain a competitive edge in the global market plus help stimulate the struggling Canadian economy. They estimate agronomic research yields 40 to 60 per cent economic returns for the whole

society.

Doug Robertson says there is no better investment for Canada than an investment in food.

President of the Grain Growers of Canada and an Alberta Barley Commission Region 2 delegate, Robertson, a farmer from Carstairs, says, "We have some of the most fertile farmland in the world with access to the third largest supply of the world's fresh water and we are not maximizing our crop production."

With the backing of these groups, he is hoping the federal government agriculture department will give some thought to increased funding.

"Well, we're hoping. The biggest problem with the feds is they've been cheapening up on what they've been spending on agriculture for years," he told T&C last week.

"When we're talking to these



The thumbnail contains a smaller version of the article titled "More ag research dollars needed" and a separate advertisement for "DIESEL INJECTION" with a price of "1/2 PRICE" and "SALE ON NOW".



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research scientists all over the place this last summer; they've said basically, 'look, this is what's happened since '94,' and we're thinking holy crap, you've lost 40 per cent of your funding since '94?"

He says of the 40 per cent, it's not all direct cuts. Some of it is inflationary and nothing is kept up.

"We've always wondered why they could barely keep the facilities going and stuff like that, let alone do more research. We're talking about dangerous levels we're getting down to here," he adds.

"The thing is, it's something ... there's damn few things the government puts money into that will actually make them money," he notes.

Robertson says research pays, and currently every one of our competitors is killing us with their research.

He adds the federal plan has been to basically point out a lot of other countries are funding their research by producer check-off, but forgetting to note many of these are mandatory check-offs.

"It's not as though we don't already have check-offs. A lot of the organizations, including the Grain Growers of Canada, are already taking check-offs just primarily for doing research," he points out.

Farmers are already putting the money up, but it's just not enough, he notes.

"It's not like farmers aren't ponying up for research and don't see the need for it," he says.

Dropping the dollars for research has been a soft target in the past for the feds. Robertson is passionate about the need for research and says we've now reached a level where, if we don't replace the brain power that we currently have, many of whom will be retiring in the next few years, we would have to retrain somebody from scratch when we do rebuild it.

"C'mon! That's crazy!" he emphasizes. "We have been lucky to have people like Jim Helm who has been up here for years and could have been making big money somewhere else down in the States." (Dr. Jim Helm is a barley breeder at Lacombe Research Station with Alberta Agriculture, and a 2002 Alberta Agriculture Hall of Fame inductee familiar to many local producers.)

The Grain Growers partner organization which Robertson heads up includes the following 14 groups, many of which are familiar to local producers.

- Alberta Barley Commission
- Alberta Grain Commission
- Alberta Oat, Rye and Triticale Association
- Alberta Pulse Growers
- Alberta Winter Wheat Pro-

ducers Commission

- Atlantic Grains Council
- British Columbia Grain Producers Association
- Canadian Canola Growers Association
- Canadian Young Farmers Forum
- Manitoba Corn Growers Association
- Oat and Barley Council of Ontario
- Prairie Oat Growers Association
- Western Barley Growers Association
- Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association

Research very important

Research is more important today than it has ever been. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations predicts that global agriculture has to grow by 70 percent by 2050 to feed an additional 2.3 billion people, creating a demand that Canadian farmers need to be prepared to capitalize on.

Increased public research funding helps develop crops that are more efficient, higher quality, healthier and more resistant to disease, pests and extreme weather conditions. At a time when demand is expected to rise significantly and wheat supplies are being threatened worldwide by an outbreak of Ug99 (a wheat stem rust virus), the time for government to invest is now, says Farmers for Investment.