Welcome to the March 2015 issue of GrainsWest.

With seeding and spraying on the horizon, I know that you, our farmer members, are getting ready for a busy time ahead. However, none of that important work can happen without first spending a great deal of time on planning and preparation.

At Alberta Barley, we take the same mantra and approach as you do when looking at the spring, summer and fall.

On the national front, with a federal election set to take place, the regulations for UPOV 91 being created, and the Canada Transportation Act review wrapping up, what happens over the next nine months will set the tone for another generation of Canadian farmers.

Additionally, with a booming craft beer market and a strong demand for Alberta’s world-renowned beef, our barley industry is going to have new challenges and opportunities that we must be ready to seize.

On top of these new opportunities, we also know that the landscape is changing on the research side. As our Farmer Model discussions last year indicated, a new system of funding for research and varietal development is soon to become a reality—and we need to be prepared for it.

This isn’t even taking into account the continued rebuilding of our industry in a post-monopoly world, or region-specific issues like fusarium that will continue to dominate the agricultural landscape.

You have trusted us to work on these issues, and, rest assured, our board of directors and staff are up to the challenge. This starts from the top, where our board has set the tone for this critical year with lively policy discussions, leading to a clear direction for our organization in the months to come. I am positive that we are well poised to represent you during this pivotal time.

Our vision this year is for farmers to continue to be heard, and we will work tirelessly to make sure that’s the case. We’ve done our homework and are ready to get to work. After all, preparation is 90 per cent of the battle. Now it’s time to lead the charge.

Until next time,
GENERAL MANAGER’S MESSAGE

Lisa Skierka
General Manager

In an election year like this one, we Canadians are able to experience the most fundamental tenet of democracy: the right to vote.

In the coming months, Alberta Barley will be working diligently to ensure that we have the best agriculture-related information available on the political front, including analysis of what this information means for our industry. We will work with the GrainsWest team to make sure we are asking the right questions of our politicians, and we will push all of the parties to tell us what their vision is for the future of agriculture.

We will also use the opportunities presented in an election year to ensure we are talking to key influencers, starting with the Alberta crops federal lobby mission to Ottawa that took place in late-February. Working with our colleagues at the canola, pulse and wheat commissions, our goal is to keep agriculture on the federal agenda, from encouraging research investment to building on international trade opportunities.

Trade remains a top priority as we work on implementing free trade agreements with the European Union and South Korea, while also moving forward with the TransPacific Partnership. By keeping the agriculture sector on the political agenda, we can reinforce the importance of trade for Canadian farmers, while also emphasizing the need to improve Canada’s transportation system in order to meet our growing trade commitments.

Other political factors that will affect our work on trade include topics as diverse as the changes to the temporary foreign worker program, market access issues and sustainability. These issues are a priority both federally and provincially, and it’s our job to ensure political candidates understand how they affect our industry.

As all of you move into the field this spring, be assured the wheels will keep turning at the office as we push forward with the policies and priorities set out by our elected representatives. Democracy is at the heart of how we operate as a provincial commission, and is the foundation of our grassroots organization.

By Jeremy Simes

It’s an extraordinary privilege that Mike Ammeter is ready to seize. In December 2014, Alberta Barley’s board of directors elected Ammeter as its new chairman following the commission’s annual general meeting in Banff.

Having previously served as vice-chairman, the Sylvan Lake-area farmer is no stranger to a leadership role. However, accepting the new responsibility was not something Ammeter took lightly.

“It’s an honour to represent the barley producers of Alberta and it’s a challenge I’m up for,” he said.

With so many policy initiatives on the horizon, Ammeter and the Alberta Barley board of directors have been busy right from the get-go. Hot topics range from transportation issues to UPOV 91 and the future of research funding in Canada.

“These are really big things that the next generation of farmers is going to be dealing with. A lot of what we decide in the next year or two will shape that. We want to get it right,” he explained.

In a post-monopoly world, farmers and segments of the industry are in rebuild mode, Ammeter added. However, armed with a collaborative board of directors, an engaged delegate base and a high-performing staff team, Ammeter said Alberta Barley is ready to help shape the agricultural landscape and ensure that farmers’ input is heard.

“We’ve tackled policy more head-on in recent years, and we haven’t shied away from it,” Ammeter said. “We have a stronger voice.”

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BARLEY RESEARCH

Growing the industry, one project at a time

By Sydney Duhaime

In order to be profitable, farmers have to stay ahead of the curve. That’s why research (and innovation) is one of Alberta Barley’s main priorities—a profitable crop needs access to cutting-edge science to stay that way.

“Research benefits farmers by developing improved varieties of barley that are better yielding, prevent the spread of pests and diseases, and thereby have the potential to maximize profits,” said Garson Law, Alberta Barley’s research manager.

As a grassroots organization, Alberta Barley’s research projects are driven by and for farmers.

“Projects are recommended by the Research Committee, which is made up of farmers and industry advisors,” Law explained, adding that projects are chosen based on their potential to benefit farmers in the current market.

In addition to funding projects, Alberta Barley also stays in communication with researchers and farmers to ensure the impact of the research being done is measurable, practical and relevant.

That’s why continued barley research is important, Law said.

“Without innovative research, the varieties in existence will become less competitive, less resistant to environmental pressures and, as a result, the yield and quality will decline and reduce profitability.”

Luckily, the future of barley research is bright—thanks in large part to a major investment from farmers, in partnership with industry and government. This is in large part due to the $11 million National Barley Research Cluster funding announced by Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada Gerry Ritz last year under the Growing Forward 2 agricultural policy framework.

The funding covers 27 new and exciting projects to be completed by 2018. These projects fall into one of the following four categories: agronomy, breeding and genetics, pathology, and value-added (barley for food). These focus areas shine a spotlight on the practice of breeding new barley varieties and combating diseases to help farmers increase their yields, as well as offer value-added barley to a variety of markets. The projects also focus on barley ingredient development for food manufacturers and creating new barley varieties that contain more healthy components.

The impact of investments like this are felt directly on the farm, said Law.

“An investment of this level enhances the competitiveness of barley farmers by giving them the tools they need,” he explained. With the science side of the equation in good hands, what about the communications side? Well, the research department has that covered, too.

Recently, Alberta Barley launched the new-and-improved research projects page on albertabarley.com/research.

Based on farmer feedback, the new research page is a comprehensive and transparent breakdown of the research projects funded by barley farmers.

“This page is an opportunity for researchers to present their projects to farmers directly. Now, farmers can see exactly how and where check-off dollars are invested,” said Law.

By clearly listing Alberta Barley-funded projects—including current and recently completed projects, summaries of the project objectives and important findings to date—the new page is truly a one-stop shop for farmers interested in the latest barley research.

“It’s all about reporting to our members to let them know what we are working on,” said Law. “We are proud of our research activities, and we want everyone to know about them.”
Part of this stronger voice includes driving discussion on the future of research funding in Canada. After the Farmer Model workshop in Calgary last June, the Alberta Barley board of directors decided to open up the conversation to all farmers. This is being done through the FarmerModel discussion on Twitter and AlbertaBarley.com.

“Our belief is that, as the primary funders of agricultural research through check-off dollars, farmers have the right and responsibility to provide input as to where that money goes,” said Ammeter.

While policy remains a critical emphasis for Alberta Barley, agronomy and research are also at the forefront. Chief among the challenges is the infiltration of fusarium head blight, a fungal disease in cereal crops. However, those concerns are currently region-specific in Alberta, making it difficult to establish an encompassing provincial or regional policy to tackle the disease, Ammeter said.

“There’s limited awareness of fusarium, and there are these wide regional variations of it. So it’s hard to come up with a one-size-fits-all policy,” he explained. “It has been a challenge for us, and the issue is not going away. But we haven’t backed away from it, and will continue to figure it out.”

Going forward, Ammeter is confident the Alberta Barley team is well equipped to handle what the future brings.

“I’m proud of this organization. Everyone involved is working hard. It’s a lot of fun, believe it or not,” he added. “There’s nothing wrong with putting in a hard day’s work.”

“These are really big things that the next generation of farmers is going to be dealing with. A lot of what we decide in the next year or two will shape that. We want to get it right.”

–Mike Ammeter

Cole Christensen
Communications Manager

Cole Christensen is the communications manager for Alberta Barley. He has been with the organization since August 2013 and currently oversees all communications activities for Alberta Barley, the Barley Council of Canada and the Western Wheat and Barley Check-off, also known as the Western Canadian Deduction.

Born and raised in Calgary, Christensen grew up dreaming of becoming a sports journalist—a dream he eventually achieved after graduating with a bachelor of arts in communications studies from the University of Calgary.

Following his graduation in 2009, Christensen worked as a sports journalist with The News Review in Yorkton, SK, and the Western Wheel in Okotoks, AB. He then moved on to the communications world with a job in the utilities industry as a communications adviser before signing on to the Alberta Barley team.

In his free time, Christensen enjoys playing basketball, watching his beloved Cleveland Browns and going on road trips across North America with his wife, Kristin.