

RESOLUTION 2-22

RESTORATION OF ALBERTA AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY AND RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT REGIONAL NETWORK OF EXPERTS

- WHEREAS:** Alberta Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Economic Development's provided regionally specialized agricultural professionals employed by the province the opportunity to meet and communicate with ASBs (and ASBs with them) on locally important agricultural issues;
- WHEREAS:** This steady discontinuation of Alberta Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Economic Development's staff presence in Alberta's rural communities has resulted in a gradual but steady decline in the Ministry's service to those communities since the early 1990s;
- WHEREAS:** Cuts to Alberta Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Economic Development staff & services since the 1990s have drastically reduced effective, consistent dialogue on provincial agricultural policy decisions, leaving local agricultural communities and their Agricultural Service Boards with little input on these decisions due to the lack of consistent, direct contact with specialized Ministry staff;
- WHEREAS:** These cuts have left Alberta's local communities and smaller agricultural sectors largely unsupported with locally based qualified agronomic advice and severed a local communications link with Ministry decision makers in Edmonton;
- WHEREAS:** The more recent elimination of many Alberta Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Economic Development's regional network of experts that were available to Alberta's Agricultural Service Boards has reduced both the quality and quantity of agricultural / environmental technical and policy information exchange between Alberta's rural communities and the Ministry;
- WHEREAS:** Alberta's larger agricultural operators and sector associations utilize their economies of scale to justify the costs of contracting private consulting services to obtain agro-economic advice, as well as enabling them to lobby policymakers;
- WHEREAS:** Alberta's smaller farmers, ranchers and industry associations lack these economies of scale to hire private consultants which leaves them dependent on all levels of government to provide this necessary information;

WHEREAS: Whereas the Alberta government provided a transition grant to the applied research and forage associations to contract specialists let go by the ministry to support producers, these measures are not long term and do not allow for direct feedback by ASBs to policy makers in the Ministry.

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED
THAT ALBERTA'S AGRICULTURAL SERVICES BOARDS REQUEST**

That Alberta's Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Economic Development support and encourage regionally based, Provincial Government staff or contractors, with extensive experience in their chosen agricultural field, to be consistently available to meet with ASBs as an expert source of the timely, detailed and unbiased information that ASBs are now expected to deliver.

SPONSORED BY: Municipal District of Pincher Creek No. 9

MOVED BY: _____

SECONDED BY: _____

CARRIED: _____

DEFEATED: _____

STATUS: Provincial

DEPARTMENT: Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Economic Development

BACKGROUND

Background: Restoration of Alberta Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Economic Development 'Key Contact' Network

The background for this resolution is quite eloquently expressed in two articles posted on the website of Farming Smarter, an applied research charity association based out of Lethbridge. The first article was posted on the Farming Smarter website on January 15th, 2021 by Kristi Cox, and is excerpted below. Some sections are bolded for emphasis.

[Alberta Agriculture & Forestry] has existed in some form since the inception of the Province in 1905.

While Alberta Agriculture & Forestry changed over time to meet the evolving needs of producers, it remained a critical piece of the success of agriculture in the province. Various programs, initiatives, offices and individuals ensured producers had all the tools they needed to get the most productivity out of the land.

John Knapp, former Deputy Minister of Agriculture, started out as a District Agriculturist (DA) in 1977.

At the time, Alberta Agriculture had a large physical presence on the rural landscape. There were 65 district offices across the province hosting about 100 DAs, 60 District Home Economists (DHEs) and about 80 specialists who supported those out of six regional offices.

“The District Agriculturist’s role was to understand the needs of his or her rural community. (DAs would) sit down with individual farmers and talk about technology changes, breeding changes, livestock, fertilizer placement, herbicide use and all the different technologies. It really began to help us produce more per acre.”

Having the DAs and DHEs based out of those district offices had a large impact on their efficacy. “They understood their community and they understood what individual issues were on their minds,” said Knapp.

Knapp explained that DAs shared knowledge in three key ways: Farmers would come to their offices with questions, farmers requested on-farm visits, and DAs organized independent, expert speakers who answered questions that came from area producers.

“DHEs worked with farm families, aiding with home design, family foods and nutrition, or clothing and textiles,” said Knapp. “All things that were part of farm families at that point. They listened, made cold calls and brought in speakers.” Sometimes they went together on farm visits. The DHE would be farm family focused, and the DA focused on the

business and technology side. It was a unique partnership that addressed the needs of the entire farm family when information wasn't easy for the general public to access.

Having knowledgeable DAs [and DHEs] enabled quick, effective resolutions to problems.

John Kolk of Kolk Farms Conrich Ltd grew up on a farm and now runs a specialty crop and irrigation farm with his family. In the 1970's Kolk's dad purchased a piece of land one spring with about 50 acres of salinity. The DA helped him determine the best process to remediate the land from start to finish. By that fall, they had permits in place and implemented the plan. "Three to four years later, it was producing crops like the rest of the land," said Kolk. "You don't forget those things."

Alberta Agriculture also offers crop insurance funded through the federal and provincial governments. This is amalgamated with a lending program under the Alberta Financial Services Corporation.

"Those programs also sat in the district office," said Knapp. "You could go to talk to your DHE about home design, you could talk to the DA about a beef ration for the winter, you could talk to the loans officer about expanding your farm and you could talk to your crop insurance officer about crop insurance for the next year." With these services all in one place it was truly one stop shopping for farmers. As technology progressed through the 80's the DAs frequently referred farmers to more specialized individuals.

When Kolk sought to expand into an alternative income source for his farm in the early 1980's, he was considering getting sheep, and accessed Alberta Agriculture's services. "We knew nothing about sheep, so we went to see the sheep specialist," said Kolk. This sheep specialist happened to be (then) DA John Knapp. Knapp told Kolk what was working for other sheep producers, advised on breeds and warned of potential pitfalls. They spent about six hours together over two meetings. Considering Knapp's experience and advice, Kolk determined the best route forward to pursue sheep production on his farm.

"There was a level of trust in the information that was provided that gave me confidence."

"If someone wanted to talk about dairy rations, you'd contact the dairy specialist," said Knapp. "If someone wanted to talk about seed varieties for the coming spring, you'd transfer them to the crop specialist. By the early 90's it was clear that we needed to convert our service into specialists on the front line."

At this point, DAs evolved again from the role of referral agents to specialists themselves in areas like beef, crop, engineering, and agriculture economics. Just a decade later in the early 2000s, with information more readily available to producers, there was yet another shift. "At that stage, the department decided to take on more of a

train the trainer role,” said Knapp. “They retained many of the specialists, they still had large numbers doing research and supporting the specialists, but they began to move away from front line extension.”

A call center took on the role of front-line extension, at its height fielding about 50,000 calls a year.

While the DAs, DHEs and their evolved forms were key to farm success in Alberta, other components of Alberta Agriculture had significant impact as well.

In most provinces, research was undertaken by a combination of the federal government and universities, but Alberta Agriculture took on a lot of research themselves. “Good things came out of that,” said Knapp. “For example: the barley varieties developed out of Lacombe; beef genomics work where we’re breeding more efficient cows; much more efficient poultry rations; some great work on peas, breeding for fungal resistance; and Alberta Ag was part of developing that great modern plant called canola out of what used to be rape seed.”

Knapp points out that there are niches the private sector can never fill.

“The private sector can’t make public policy,” Knapp said. “They can certainly have input into public policy, but the government is always going to need analysts and people to develop policy options for the minister and cabinet to look at.”

While Alberta Agriculture has evolved over the years, Kolk thinks it is still relevant today. “Alberta Ag has been good on the whole sustainability file,” said Kolk. “Whether that’s water efficiency, irrigation efficiency, reduced tillage, reduced chemicals, or the four Rs of fertilizer- that sort of stuff is where there was a public need, a public good, and no natural seller.”

Kolk finds Alberta Agriculture important for information exchange and distribution through conferences like the Irrigation Update and the Agronomy Update.

He also thinks they are key in surveillance with issues like pests and challenges like clubroot and fusarium.

Recently, when Kolk was investigating subsurface irrigation, one of the first things he did was to sit down with the people at Alberta Ag’s irrigation sector. When he wanted to streamline weekly moisture soil checks, he worked with Alberta Ag first for guidance with moisture sensors. Then, they consulted with Dr. Appels at Lethbridge College.

“It takes a village,” said Kolk. “It was critical to talk to people that I had a lot of trust in because they had expertise and they weren’t trying to sell me anything.

They were there tosay, ‘This is what we’ve learned, and this is what you should be careful of.’”

“If your agronomist is also working for an input supplier, he’s not *your* agronomist,” said Kolk. “Alberta Ag has been, and I hope in the future will continue to be, that respected source of information from a neutral party.”

On February 26, 2021, Ken Coles, Executive Director of Farming Smarter, lamented the current state of provincially funded agricultural research, extension, and connection with rural Alberta that seems to be a feature of current provincial agriculture policy. A portion of his letter is excerpted below, with some sections bolded for emphasis.

Our community may face a farmer-led research fallacy in its new way of supporting agriculture research.

In 2020, a new government made dramatic changes to Alberta Agriculture...I wish farmers and ranchers showed Bill6 passion about the recent changes to Alberta agriculture research as it will create gaps in history.

This time, the agriculture industry asked for the change. They wanted to see reinvestment into research after losing ACIDF (Agriculture Crop Industry Development Fund). After a series of consultations, what came out didn’t replace the grant; it created something entirely different.

The government created RDAR (Results Driven Agricultural Research). They touted it as a one stop funding agency that would empower farmers to decide how to spend public investment in research and extension. An interesting idea with some good promise, but not without challenge. RDAR’s 33 members represent everything from goats and eggs to peas and bees. It also has an expanded advisory committee of over 50 organizations including all the applied research and forage associations. Team FarmRite (a group of seven ag research organizations and three agricultural colleges) is a voting member. RDAR ran a call for proposals this fall and is set to announce its first round of *results driven research* funding to the industry.

But this government completed the gutting of Alberta Agriculture’s research and extension work, cuts to agriculture service boards, cuts to applied research associations and a transfer of agriculture research assets to post-secondary institutions.

In addition to this, the Canadian Agriculture Partnership program is mostly frozen. (RDAR is supposed to take over two programs — Accelerating the Advancement of Agricultural Innovation and Adapting Innovative Solutions in Agriculture — that funded \$12 million in research annually).

While many Albertans understand and appreciate government fiscal responsibility, there is an undeniably large decrease in investment, a loss of public focused human resources and, most importantly, a detached relationship between producers and government.

Early in the consultations, the Alberta government noted that it was the only province doing its own research. It looked to the Saskatchewan model that supports post-secondary institutions. So, it appears the guiding direction supports transferring some Alberta government scientists to universities and colleges and, in some instances, 2 to 3-year access agreements for land and facilities.

While it may seem like a good thing that these resources remain in agriculture, I have serious concerns regarding their long-term stability. First, these transfers come with Alberta Agriculture funding for two to three years. When the funds run out, post-secondary institutions will compete, mainly through RDAR, to maintain support for scientists, infrastructure, and projects. All while the institutions face significant budget cuts. To make things even more precarious, everyone will compete for drastically diminished funding and that's when the bubble bursts. I must admit I'm very concerned for the future of publicly funded research and innovation development.

As for extension and knowledge transfer, I believe it will soon disappear completely.

The historical perspectives expressed in these two Farming Smarter articles, which describe the devolution of Alberta Agriculture & Forestry's funding commitment and presence in independent agricultural research and technology transfer to local agricultural communities, certainly echoes our experience in the Municipal District of Pincher Creek.

When the District Alberta Agriculture offices began to close in the early 1990s, our Agricultural Service Board, like many other ASB's around the province, attempted to fill some of the void left by the elimination of the Das, DHEs, and other provincial support staff. To some extent, we had success, but the already existing demands of enforcing provincial legislation for weeds, agricultural pests, soil erosion, and practical programs to support them including vegetation control programs stretched municipal capacities to the limit. In many cases, support to farmers that had been provided by the district offices and the provincial staff simply disappeared altogether.

Other consequences of the disappearance of Alberta Agriculture & Forestry from rural Alberta are outlined in the resolution.