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FALL 2025 EDITION

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COVER PHOTO:
Irrigating potato agronomy plots at Farming Smarter.

Credit: *Farming Smarter*

President's Message

We Foster Excellence Around Us

Ryan Mercer
Farming Smarter Board President

Ryan Mercer, *Farming Smarter* President, speaks to the Field School audience June 25. Left to Right: Will Van Roessel, Hon. RJ Sigurdson Minister of Agriculture & Irrigation, Ken Coles Farming Smarter Executive Director, Tatum Adair, Allison Baptista, Levi Harasem-Mitchell, and Ryan Mercer.

Farming Smarter grows every year. It finds more sources of income, joint venture partnerships and areas of agriculture that need innovation.

Our core values and ambition stay focused on helping the agriculture industry succeed and stay globally competitive, but our focus gets sharper all the time.

Over the course of 2025, the board and staff reviewed our old strategic plan and created a new one. What stands out most in the new plan is its razor sharp focus.

Our network of southern Alberta farmers, agronomists, researchers and industry stands out in Canada as one of the strongest forces directing agriculture research. We chafe a bit at the term 'applied research' because it doesn't come close to describing the way that we work with our network. We form relationships, listen to people, look at everything and help where we can.

We came to recognize that developing and strengthening an innovation network required people – lots of people involved in all aspects of agriculture. In this world where people lean toward binary, we embraced complexity.

This network directs research toward necessary innovation and priorities front of mind for the industry. It sees the knowledge gaps and new challenges in need of research. Our partnership and research program with McCain, for instance, fills a knowledge gap that can benefit both farmers and processors.

We conduct research on farms, with post secondary researchers, federal researchers and for commercial enterprises (new, old, large, small). Progress doesn't come from a single source imposing a single solution. It comes from all hands on deck with many perspectives looking at needed innovation from all angles.

Those angles include everything about managing soil and water needs, crop types and varieties, equipment and technology, timing of all stages from planting to processing and so much more.

Another important lesson ingrained at *Farming Smarter* as it grew is that an innovation system needs an engine. We noticed that developing our core staff creates a strong foundation to build excellence. We hire highly qualified people excited to further our core values and ambition – to give our industry what it needs to lead globally. We give staff lots of opportunities to stretch boundaries and dig deep on issues. We foster a culture of unimpeded investigation in whatever direction tugs at you. We do this with staff and students and it pays off in spades.

Farming Smarter knows, without question, that it is always the people that make the difference between success and mediocrity. And we're not settling for mediocrity. FS

Executive Director's Report

Going For The Win!

Ken Coles
Farming Smarter Executive Director

There wasn't a dull moment at *Farming Smarter* this year. We were proud to welcome back 10 returning students along with five new faces who enthusiastically "pounded the plots" in the pursuit of new agronomy knowledge. Team leads conducted this triumphant choir as they shared Spotify playlists and whistled while they worked.

It was so nice to see some rain this year especially since our new irrigation equipment wasn't eager to get to work on time. A new leased quarter section two miles east of Coaldale along Highway 3 gave us more prominent exposure and space to put our trials. Our new equipment, including Carlo's beautiful new Fendt tractor, was on display when Minister RJ Sigurdson joined us on location to announce a capital investment that saw *Farming Smarter* receive $500,000. We were also excited to have Minister Neudorf on day two of our Field School, which was a huge success. Yes, it's still important to get into the field and learn together.

Overall, our trial success was high with very few mistakes and we're eager to work through the data to see what we learned. Some highlights include a new trial looking at strip till applied deep banded fertilizer for canola (RDAR), updating fertilizer recommendations for irrigated crops (RDAR), a contract potato trial with McCain, a large seed canola trial with Bayer, a double cropping silage project (RDAR) and two kochia projects (WGRF, Sask Pulse Growers). The crew was also proud to have published a journal article in the *Canadian Journal of Plant Science* (https://cdnsciencepub.com/doi/full/10.1139/cjps-2025-0045).

Our community involvement was a home run as our Open Farm Day event was bigger than ever with 442 people and the Guinness Book of World Records largest living steer in attendance. We hosted college students to help with our sweet corn and hemp harvest and took home first prize for our float in the Whoop Up Days parade.

We finish this great season in a fantastic position to show how world-class Farming Smarter truly is. And I don't mean to reference the 2024 trip that took 23 farmers to Brazil, or the upcoming tour that will take 31 to Australia and New Zealand in 2026! Stay tuned to see what we have in store for southern Alberta. I'll drop the mic here and wish you all a prosperous and joy-filled fall and winter. FS

First prize ribbon and trophy for Farming Smarter float in Whoop Up Days parade.

Guiding *Farming Smarter* To A Bright Future

by Amanda Brittain

Just as our producers can't throw a few seeds in the ground, hope for rain, and expect a bountiful harvest, the *Farming Smarter* Board and staff don't just toss a few ideas around and hope for strong growth. The exponential growth the organization achieved over the past 18 years is thanks to strong Strategic Plans, a dedicated Board of Directors, and enthusiastic staff.

In the past, Farmer Smarter used consultants to help create Strategic Plans. However, the Board and staff put together the latest plan alone.

"We have a great Board and some very long-term staff members," said Jamie Puchinger, Assistant Manager. "The Board has definite ideas of where we should head and the staff know what we're capable of achieving. Together, we make a great team and created the plan that will guide us for the next five years."

The plan contains four goals and each goal includes strategies, actions and a description of what achieving those goals will look like. Here's a look at each of the goals.

Goal 1: Conduct practical, unbiased, and science-based agriculture research to support innovation on the Canadian prairies.

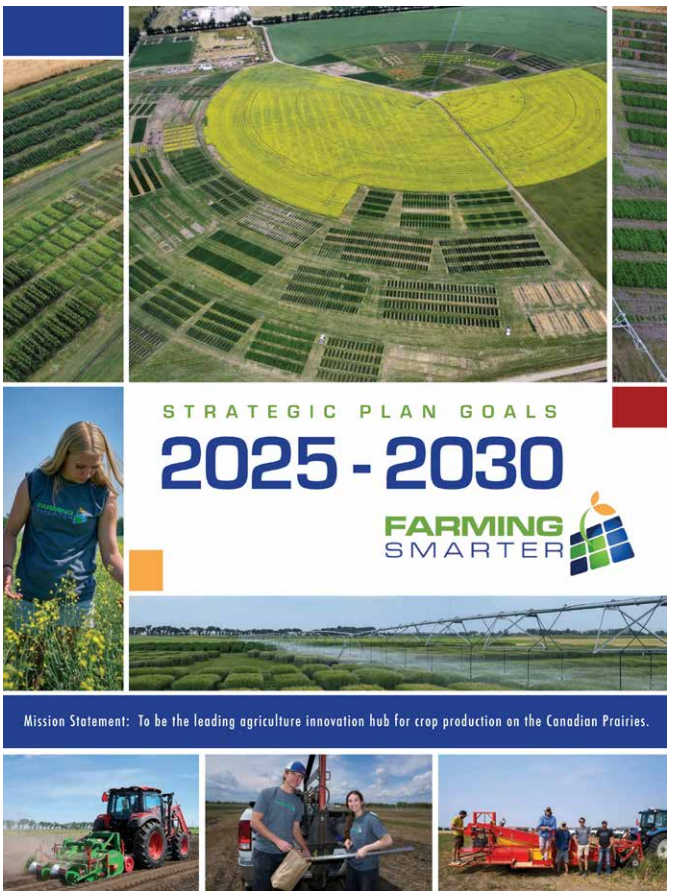
This goal contains the ambitious target of completing 850 research trials over the next five years. Jamie is optimistic that the organization can achieve this target.

"We have some great partnerships with farmers who allow us to use land for trials," she says. "We try to make it easy for our farm partners by simplifying processes and minimizing disruption to farm operations while maintaining data quality."

> We try to make it easy for our farm partners by simplifying processes and minimizing disruption to farm operations while maintaining data quality.
> —Jamie Puchinger, *Farming Smarter* Assistant Manager.

Goal 2: To actively build resilient farms by driving adoption of sustainable practices that are science based, regionally focused and system specific.

While every farm in southern Alberta is different, Farming Smarter chooses to work with progressive and innovative farms eager to try new practices. Even farmers interested in trying new practices need to see a clear return on investment either financially or through improved efficiency. The *Farming Smarter* team takes this need into consideration when building research partnerships and ensures these progressive farmers see a solid return on investment when they participate in trials. All *Farming Smarter* research results are public when projects complete.



Take me to the full plan

Goal 3: Be Alberta's leading agronomy network for knowledge and training.

Jamie admits to having a special place in her heart for this goal. "I love how we continue to build a community of engaged learners who challenge the status quo and value networking opportunities," she says. *Farming Smarter* creates experiences that provide value to farmers, industry professionals, government, universities, and the private sector.

Goal 4: Peak performance through a people-first culture.

Farming Smarter's success is thanks to the people on the team. By focusing on the people – staff, Board members, farmers, and even the public – the organization continues to grow and succeed.

Farming is a challenging and fulfilling profession. *Farming Smarter*'s latest Strategic plan is designed to bring together the people and resources needed to find innovative solutions to challenges and to have a positive impact on southern Alberta's agriculture industry. FS

Working Together Towards A Better Future

by Amanda Brittain

One of the most enduring partnerships of the Oldman Watershed Council (OWC) is its partnership with *Farming Smarter*. This partnership works because both organizations share a core goal: working with farmers toward a brighter future.

The Oldman Watershed Council is one of Alberta's Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils. It works within a large land and water system in southern Alberta and Montana. The watershed encompasses 23,000 square kilometers in Alberta and 2,100 square kilometers in Montana.

About 210,000 people live in the watershed. The western portion of the watershed is in the Rocky Mountains where the watershed sources of water begin. This section of the watershed enjoys a high volume of good quality water. As water flows east, various rivers and tributaries become the Oldman River.

Oldman Watershed Council booth at *Farming Smarter* Open Farm Day 2025. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

"Drought is the biggest water issue facing farmers right now," says OWC Executive Director Shannon Frank. "Extreme weather events are becoming more common so it's vitally important that organizations such as ours work together to be leaders and innovators in environmental and community improvement initiatives."

The OWC focuses on four main organizational priorities: Educational and Literacy on Watershed Health; Planning, Implementation and Restoration Projects; Monitoring and Assessment; and Agriculture Programs – this last goal is a big one. "About 80% of the watershed is used for some form of agriculture," says Shannon. "The western section of the watershed is mostly ranchland while the eastern section supports crop production. That's where our partnership with *Farming Smarter* is the most valuable."

Approximately 90% of the water in the watershed irrigates food crops. OWC works closely with irrigation districts and individual farmers to explore ways to strengthen the watershed and, in turn, food security. "Sometimes we need a farmer whose farm meets specific requirements for a study, so we reach out to our colleagues at *Farming Smarter* and they always provide us with good recommendations," says Shannon. "We collaborate with farmers and ranchers on projects beneficial to their farm and the watershed, such as riparian fencing for ranchers, and keeping invasive aquatic species out of the watershed for both ranchers and farmers."

Extreme weather events are becoming more common so it's vitally important that organizations such as Farming Smarter and OWC work together to be leaders and innovators in environmental and community improvement initiatives.

OWC also partners with individual farmers and ranchers to support restoration activities across private and public land. Reducing the impact of agriculture on the watershed is critical to preserving and maintaining water supply for future generations.

Landowners – including farmers – can apply for grants from the OWC to tackle small projects that will improve the watershed's health or reduce the impact agricultural activities have on the land. "The type of project we like to fund is anything that benefits the people downstream," says Shannon. "Protecting a creek or a wetland on agricultural land benefits everyone in the watershed."

Each year, OWC joins *Farming Smarter*'s Open Farm Day. "Talking to the public about where food comes from and how agriculture uses the land and water is really important," says Shannon. "We see ourselves as the conveners who bring rural and urban folks together so both groups get a better understanding of each other."

OWC is in the middle of a five-year, agricultural literacy project called *Connecting People, Solutions, and Innovations*. The project is the follow-up to its previous multi-year investment in public agricultural literacy, *Uniting Rural Producers and Urban Consumers* that reached over 100,000 people across the watershed in person and online.

Shannon says that while they are well-known to ranchers, she wants to make more connections with the crop farmers.

"Crop farmers may not be aware of all our programs and the work we do," she says. "If I could tell them one thing, I'd encourage them to get in touch with us. We'd be happy to help with any sort of environmental stewardship initiative and we're always looking for water champions and spokespeople!" FS

Turning Research Ideas Into Projects Farmers Value

Farming Smarter proposals are shaped by practicality

by: Natalie Noble

When producers face challenges – agronomic, equipment, pesticide or environment related – *Farming Smarter* supports other researchers to access funding. Outside its own research program, *Farming Smarter* guides external research partners engaged in adoption-focused innovation.

"Grant writing requires a fine balance between integrating farmer relevance, economic viability and scientific methods," said Haider Abbas, canola research scientist at Lakeland College. "For research in Alberta crop production, *Farming Smarter* is a trusted collaborator whose participation in our proposal helps ensure the project includes data representing growing conditions observed in southern Alberta."

That farmer connection is critical at *Farming Smarter*. "Grant writing starts with real, actual agriculture," said Thierry Fonville, *Farming Smarter* Research Scientist. "Then we get into the nitty gritty of it. What is the exact challenge? Is it a new technique to study? An issue with weeds, pesticides, herbicides? An environmental issue?"

Farming Smarter is a connector. "We work to match the project with the right funder," said Mike Gretzinger, *Farming Smarter* Research Manager. "A lot of researchers are limited to one or two mainstreams in the yearly or semi-annual cycle. We've branched out in a way where it never stops. There's always a proposal we're pushing forward."

Requests for smaller scale to large multi-region projects come from public and post-secondary institutions across Alberta and Saskatchewan, producer organizations and other research associations. *Farming Smarter* also received an uptick in industry and commercial interest.

Key research focuses on hard agronomy, fertilizers, equipment and irrigation. "How do you get your crops in the ground? Fertilize them? Give them enough water? How many seeds do you put in the ground? At which depth? What spacing? These are the details where a lot of gains can be made," said Fonville.

Farming Smarter's research grant funding tends to come from provincial or philanthropic grants. Often taking the lead, the team acts as the proposal caretaker, reaching out to partners where appropriate. They also design most trials and connect with producers to ensure their challenges are addressed.

Robyne Davidson from Lakeland College presenting at a field day in 2025. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

Several factors make *Farming Smarter* a formidable partner in funding proposal execution. They have a strong network of involved people, including subscribers, event attendees and scientists. "They're made up of agronomists, other researchers, farmers and industry," said Gretzinger. "They're spread from all walks of the industry, giving us a clear perspective on things."

As a not-for-profit, it has policies and procedures in place to ensure high quality research, but flexibility is key. The size and structure of the organization with the best people in the right place also expedites processes.

"We don't have much red tape and bureaucracy, so we're responsive," said Gretzinger. "Somewhere else, it can take five years to put a project together; we might do it in year one. We've got flexible funding and different sponsorship levels. We're not stuck waiting for the next funding cycle. We have the flexibility to get things rolling."

Working with the *Farming Smarter* team, researchers' proposals gain depth. "We each bring unique strengths – combining research design, student training, farmer networks, industry trust and extension expertise," said Abbas. "Together, these strengths fit naturally, making proposals stronger, projects more impactful and ensuring that diverse soil geographies and environmental variations are well represented."

Abbas described the relationship. "It feels less like a formal partnership and more like working alongside colleagues who share the same mission," he said.

Perhaps the most meaningful result of the partnership – farmer value.

"The most rewarding part is seeing research move from paper to practice. It's that moment when a farmer at a field day looks at a plot and says, "*'This could work on my farm,'*" said Abbas. "*Farming Smarter*'s grower networks, on-farm trial expertise and extension platforms turn research ideas into projects funders can trust and farmers find valuable." FS

Strip Tillage And Narrow Rows Show Promise In Prairie Cropping Systems

by Jena Lynde-Smith

Southern Alberta farmers may soon have new strategies to strengthen crop establishment and manage risk in dry conditions. Two recent *Farming Smarter* studies, led by research scientist Thierry Fonville, looked at canola and grain corn production under Prairie conditions. The findings highlight both opportunities and trade-offs when it comes to strip tillage, precision planting, and row spacing.

Strip tilling for an on-farm field trial. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

Canola: Strip Tillage + Precision Planting

Fonville and his team set out to answer a straightforward but important question: what is the best way to get canola in the ground to optimize yield and quality?

"Over the last 30 years we've seen extensive adoption of no-till in this region and that's still the gold standard in many ways," Fonville explained. "But we wanted to test newer equipment like strip tillage and precision planters and see how they perform under both irrigated and rainfed systems."

The study confirmed that precision planting improved emergence. Seeds were placed more evenly, creating plants that established better and competed less with each other. But canola's plastic growth habits complicated the results.

"Canola is tricky—it can compensate later in the season," Fonville said. "So even though we saw better establishment early on with the precision planter, at the end of the season the yield was slightly lower compared to the other seeders."

Fonville recommends that to match the performance of the other openers, the precision planter might do better at a lower seeding rate to take into account higher emergence.

Strip tillage, meanwhile, had comparable yields to conventional tillage, which is far more disruptive to the soil.

"Strip tillage is kind of an in-between," Fonville said. "It opens up enough soil to help plants establish, but still leaves most of it undisturbed, which reduces erosion, conserves water and helps with weed control."

In rainfed conditions, no-till remains a strong option for risk management. But for irrigated acres or farmers considering new equipment, strip tillage paired with the right opener could be a viable choice.

"It's not an immediate yield boost, but the long-term soil health and erosion benefits make it worth considering."

Corn: Narrow Rows and Smart Seeding Rates

The second study tackled a rare question on the Prairies: can grain corn be viable under rainfed conditions?

"This was a unique project," said Fonville. "Corn is a water-consuming crop and growing it without irrigation is always going to be risky. But we wanted to test if row spacing, seeding rates and nutrient management could make it work."

Over nearly a decade of trials, researchers tested different row spacings, seeding rates, nitrogen levels and tillage practices. The most consistent finding was that narrow rows (51 cm) outperformed wider rows (76 cm).

"With the tighter rows, we saw significantly better yield," Fonville explained. "It allowed for more plants in the ground and faster canopy closure, which improved moisture efficiency."

But seeding rates came with caveats. In wetter years, higher seeding rates provided more yield, whereas in dry years, there was no benefit. The same held true for nitrogen.

"There's a clear cap," Fonville said. "Beyond 113 kilograms per hectare, you actually reduce emergence and harm the crop. That's very different from irrigated systems, where you can put a lot more on and the corn will use it."

On tillage, researchers saw no major yield differences between conventional and zero-till systems.

A Practical Kind of Innovation

For Fonville, the point of these studies isn't to deliver a universal prescription. It's about providing farmers with reliable information they can use to make choices. That's also why the work is published in peer-reviewed journals.

"Publishing helps us show that the questions farmers ask here matter on a broader scale," Fonville said. "It connects farmer-driven research to the wider scientific community."

Publishing also expands impact.

"After the canola study came out, we actually had people reach out from across Canada and even the U.S.," Fonville noted. "They wanted to know how we were testing these systems in Prairie conditions, because they're asking the same questions."

Looking ahead, Fonville believes the best results will come from pairing these practices with tools like weather models, soil testing, and economic analysis.

"There's no one-size-fits-all answer," he said. "But when farmers have access to this kind of research, they can adapt it to their own fields and make decisions with more confidence." FS

Scan to read more about this project

The Kochia Battlefront

A series of *Farming Smarter* and partner trials target kochia's advance across the prairies

by: Natalie Noble

Farming Smarter collaborates with prairie research partners to fight against kochia with a number of integrated research projects. The weed is a double threat in its quick spread and rapid resistance adaptation.

"Kochia has a number of characteristics that make it well adapted to life on the Prairies in the worst way," said Lewis Baarda, *Farming Smarter* Field Tested manager. "It's resistant to drought and salinity and it quickly builds chemical resistance to multiple herbicides. For example, we went from virtually zero glyphosate resistance to over 75 per cent in 10 years."

When researchers and growers can't turn to chemical controls, they use cultural controls, including increased seeding rates, tillage, mowing, and salt tolerant forages that outcompete kochia.

Lewis Baarda sampling kochia for herbicide resistance. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

Kochia in low-lying and saline areas in Alberta

Farming Smarter's Field Tested team experiments with kochia management in low-lying and saline areas. In year-one of three, the four on-farm trial locations include two near Stirling, one in Coaldale and one near Picture Butte and evaluate a wheat-canola-lentil rotation.

"This year we're looking to see if wheat at a normal or a double seed rate can outcompete kochia," said Tatum Adair, *Farming Smarter* research assistant, adding she is interested to see which crop types respond best to 10 different cultural control approaches.

"The research is into managing kochia, but it tends to be in productive areas of the field. We wanted to look at low-lying or drought areas," said Adair. "The goal is to deliver farmers site-specific kochia management strategies."

The study explores kochia growth and how the weed seed bed changes. "How many weeds do we find in the soil at the start and at the end? What works in those tough areas and what doesn't?" said Baarda. "We're giving farmers different tools and costs. What we learn is going to be directly applicable to farmers in our area."

Integrated Weed Management Framework

Farming Smarter takes part in the Integrated Weed Management Framework funded by Saskatchewan Pulse Growers (SPG). In year-one of five, the framework facilitates a collaborative effort with some of the top weed players across the Prairies.

"It's not just one lab or one region. We have scientists, producers, agronomists, computer scientists and industry collaborators," said Racquelle Peters, research officer at the University of Saskatchewan's (USask) Agronomy and Crop Imaging Lab. "We're all pulling in the same direction, sharing knowledge, comparing notes and filling in gaps."

Dr. Steve Shirtliffe, director at USask's Nutrien Centre for Sustainable and Digital Agriculture, answered SPG's call for a large application studying kochia in pulses and put together the team. "I wanted to model this as a nimble research project that can respond to change, has strong supporting academics and is flexible. If something is not working, we can change focus," he said. "We're building on research we've done already. Heck, we've been working on weed control in kochia at least 15-to-20 years."

The team structured the research program to conduct field-level, on-farm research. "Being there and communicating this research so farmers can see it at ground zero is important," said Shirtliffe.

Beyond focusing on new herbicide groups, the framework projects also consider practices previously considered organic weed control methods. Here's a rundown of all eight:

Herbicide screening trial. First-round testing residual herbicide kochia control in lentils completed this season. "This study supports label expansions for new herbicide tolerance systems and new uses of existing and potential herbicide options," said Peters. Based on visuals alone, we saw some great early results in kochia with little-to-no crop injuries. Some plots are beautifully clean."

Replicated strip trial. This is an on-commercial-farm trial where treatments overlay a kochia patch in a saline zone. By running strip trials across salinity gradients, researchers examine what works under real-world field conditions. The goal is to give farmers practical options for managing kochia where it is most prolific and evaluate how salinity level impacts efficacy.

Shirtliffe said that the interaction with salinity, as with *Farming Smarter*'s Alberta trial, hasn't been a prior focus in kochia research. "Field saline areas are the mother patches that often start in the field and then allow cross-field invasion."

Herbicide layering. Headed by Jessica Enns, Western Applied Research Corporation (WARC) research manager, and starting this fall, the study considers layering herbicides under saline conditions and placing them side by side. "We found a field that has similar management, but there's a saline hotspot and a non-saline hotspot, so we can compare how saline conditions effect kochia's response to various herbicide layering chemistries," said Peters.

Scan to read more about this project

Kochia growing in the *Farming Smarter* trials. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

Long-term kochia patch mowing demonstration. This project is highly producer-collaborative. "We drove out and looked for kochia patches, not hard to find this year," said Peters. "We have great relationships with local producers. We're setting up on their kochia patches for four years, returning each year to mow kochia at the proper stage before it sets seed."

The study will collect data from satellite imagery to map kochia and its response. "Satellite imagery works especially well in lentils. As the crop ripens down and turns that reddish-brown color, kochia stays green," said Shirtliffe. "With the help of Dr. Thuan Ha at USask's Agronomic Crop Imaging Lab, we developed an AI-based machine learning model that identifies kochia patches."

Baseline Assessment of Metribuzin Resistance in Canadian Kochia Populations. Headed by Dr. Charles Geddes, Lethbridge Research and Development Centre research scientist, the project launched this spring. "We're building a baseline picture of metribuzin resistance in Canadian kochia populations," said Peters.

Mowing timing plot study. Geddes's second plot study aims to confirm the ideal mowing rate based on four timings and how they reduce kochia seed production and seedbank inputs.

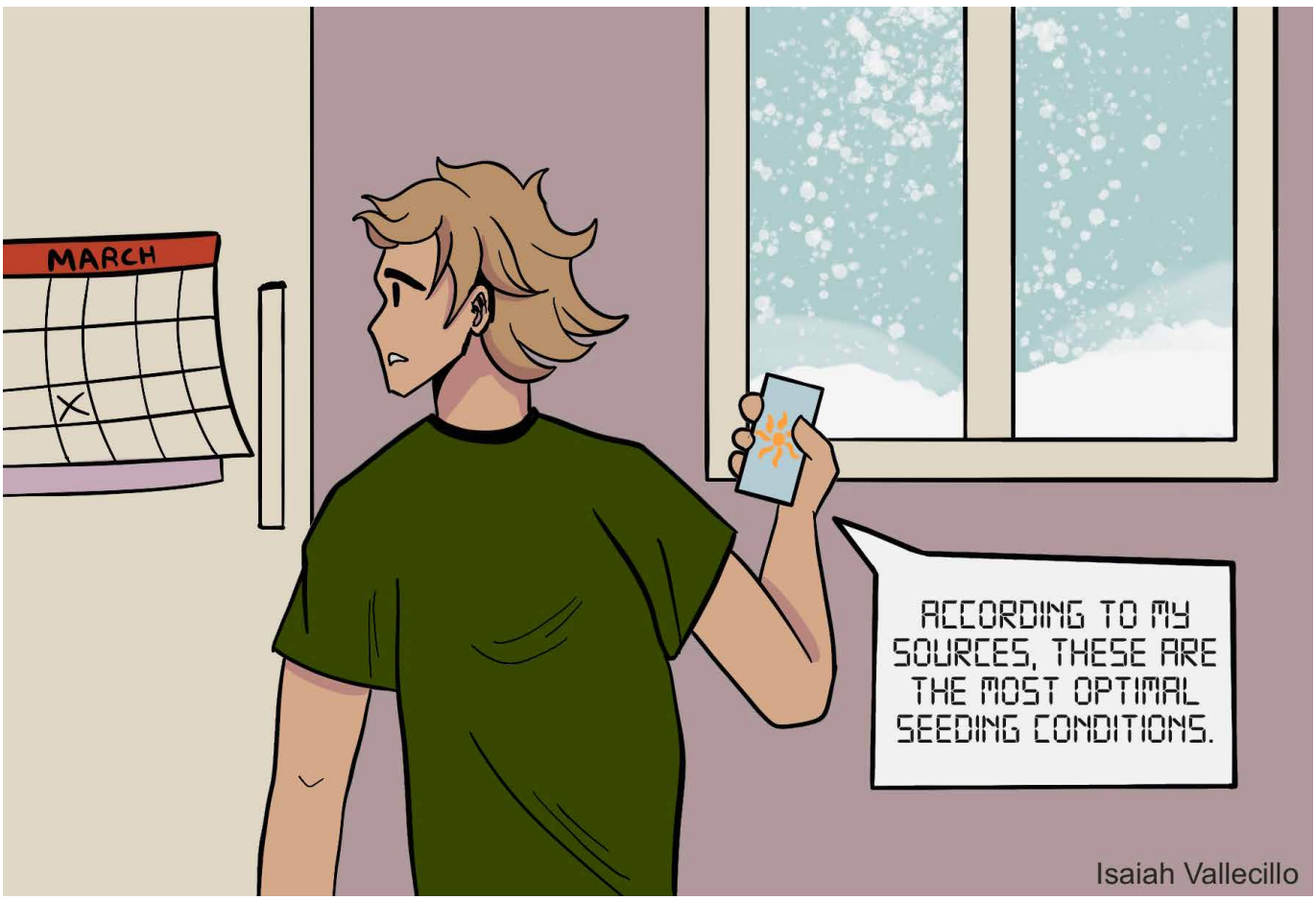
Controlling kochia with metribuzin. Dr. Shaun Sharpe, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) research scientist, launched a greenhouse study to determine a biologically effective dose for controlling kochia with metribuzin.

Field portion. "Next year, we will take Dr. Sharpe's results and apply them in the field," said Peters.

That's a lot of moving pieces, but they corelate. "Although we have all these projects with different objectives, they all serve each other," said Peters. "We can pick the best treatments and give farmers multiple solutions."

It's important to note that kochia's rapid spread makes it a community problem. Collaboration is critical in expediting progress. "When the leading experts on the topic across the prairies get together and have discussions, we're going to have those connections and synergies," said Baarda.

Underpinning it all, are farmers. "Research doesn't move forward without farmers. Whether it's setting up in their field, doing the work or letting us come do the work," said Peters. "Having those conversations and hearing farmer perspectives and struggles, shapes our questions we study. We learn from each other. Our goal is to help producers grow better. We can't do that without talking to them and hearing what they need." FS



Scale-Up With Third-Party Research

Large companies drawn to *Farming Smarter*'s Commercial Innovation program

by Natalie Noble

Farming Smarter actively supports companies by designing and conducting trials to help them reach goals through its Commercial Innovation program.

"Companies used to send a protocol for us to carry out the trial," said Lewis Baarda, *Farming Smarter* Field Tested Manager. "Now, we take an active leadership role. It's a conversation and we continue to learn with them; we're just as curious and these are symbiotic relationships."

Farming Smarter has over a decade experience conducting contract trials. Its seen a surge in the last five years and works with several multi-national companies, a client in China, and is in talks with potential clients in southern California and Florida.

The *Farming Smarter* team members know southern Alberta agronomy like the back of their hands. Their local intelligence is advantageous to companies looking for regional adaptation studies, including McCain Foods (McCain), The Little Potato Company and Bayer CropScience.

"There's often the need to test products from different growing regions," said Trevor Deering, *Farming Smarter* Commercial Innovation Manager. "Bringing any crop into our environment, climate and soils is a whole different ballgame."

Externally developed data matters. "Our research gains more traction because we provide a third-party, unbiased, scientific perspective," said Deering. "We are rigorous in our research."

For massive companies, there are big benefits of looking beyond internal research.

"Companies realize how expensive and difficult it is to do good research, especially when that regional aspect is critical," said Baarda. "Their experience may not apply to the local context. They're recognizing the importance of having somebody they trust on the ground."

In large scale, production-focused research, there's specialized knowledge and equipment required, maintenance, safety training, liability concerns and risk mitigation.

"We have a big program, a dozen full-time staff and we're pushing 200 trials a year," said Baarda. "We're well-equipped to help these companies meet local-level needs."

Farming Smarter's relationship with McCain showcases many advantages, including quickly identifying opportunity.

"We saw a gap in marketplace research for potatoes," said Baarda. "There's a huge footprint for the potato production industry in southern Alberta, but not a lot of research players."

Using small plot research, Baarda's team can manipulate multiple factors before taking results to the field and then into farmer adoption.

"It's tough to control variability on the farm," said Baarda. "Plot work allows the researcher to take risks without worrying how it affects the farmer."

When dealing with a potato product, typically french fries for McCain, processing attributes are key. Currently, the Russet Burbank is the common go-to for its quality parameters. "It's the right size for the right number of french fries. It turns the right color when you fry it and has the right starch content," said Baarda. "But it may not be the most efficient potato to grow. Are there other potatoes that use less fertilizer? Less water? Can we maximize the yield?"

With McCain, *Farming Smarter* is exploring five potato varieties and fertilizer rates for each. "We're looking for options that take the pressure off farmers, use less resources and produce the same amount of fries," said Baarda.

Prior to the McCain relationship, *Farming Smarter* streamlined its contract research program in its long-term relationship with Bayer. It drove mutual expertise in best practices for growing corn, with variety testing, herbicide testing in corn and soybean systems, and conducting canola variety trials.

Heavily focused on agronomic practice and variety trials with Bayer since 2019, *Farming Smarter* invested in specialized equipment, while Deering and Carlo Van Herk, *Farming Smarter* Field Operation Lead, became corn growing experts. The team takes on much heavy lifting.

Potato plots growing at *Farming Smarter* 2025
Credit: *Farming Smarter*

"Bayer has its own research teams. But it's a huge investment," said Van Herk. "It requires specialized equipment, people and land. There're so many pieces to doing the research right. We run trials for them and take on those overhead issues, making everything more affordable. That's key to why these companies work with us."

For companies pondering contract research, the team is happy to connect, especially if there's an out-of-the-box idea.

"Don't take anything off the table," said Baarda. "We've done many different things within our broad scope and capabilities. We work with many major multinational companies and we execute with high-level professionalism."

Deering agreed. "Don't be afraid to ask crazy things. We love all things science," he said. "Give us a call and let's have a quick chat." FS

Farming Smarter Secures Coaldale Land

New site expands research opportunities

by Jena Lynde-Smith

Farming Smarter road-side signs already attracting interest. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

For *Farming Smarter*, land is more than soil and space — it's the foundation of meaningful agricultural research. That's why securing a new five-year lease on a quarter section of land in Coaldale, Alberta, is such a milestone for the organization.

"Land is one of the most critical pieces of infrastructure we need," explained Jamie Puchinger, *Farming Smarter* Assistant Manager. "We need four times as much land on any given year than we actually need to do the research because we run crop rotations similar to a farm."

Rotation is an integral part of research results as plots planted on the same soil year after year confound treatment effects.

The Coaldale site not only provides additional rotation ground but also comes with a feature that excites the team: visibility. The quarter section offers 800 meters of highway frontage along Highway 3, one of southern Alberta's busiest routes. According to the province, average annual daily traffic on this stretch reached 20,080 vehicles in 2024.

Farming Smarter wasted no time capitalizing on that exposure.

"We put some *Farming Smarter* signs—just 4x8 aluminum signs with our logo—along the highway," said Puchinger. "We've already received countless comments and phone calls from people in the industry saying, 'Hey, you guys are doing stuff on that piece of land along the highway. That's awesome.'"

The site's visibility has turned into an organic awareness campaign for the non-profit. "It's raised the profile of the organization," Puchinger said. "We hadn't done a great job in the past of making sure people knew all the land we manage. This gave us a push to show how much we have under our management."

New ground for irrigation research

The Coaldale quarter also comes with irrigation rights — an important factor in expanding *Farming Smarter*'s portfolio of research.

"In southern Alberta, the ability to do irrigation research is important," explained Puchinger. "If we're just picking up dryland, it's not quite as valuable as irrigated land, which is pretty meaningful to the work we're pursuing right now."

That work spans high-value crops like potatoes, seed canola, and seed alfalfa, plus staples such as wheat, barley, and pulses. With southern Alberta hosting the largest concentration of irrigated acres in Canada, updating and expanding research on fertility, rotation, and crop management under irrigation is a pressing need.

"There's been lots of fertility work done under irrigation here, but it's all 20-plus years old," Puchinger said. "Varieties have changed substantially in that time, so you can't take fertilizer recommendations built on varieties we no longer use and apply them to current production practices. We want to make sure our work is current and meaningful for area growers."

Adding Coaldale to its land portfolio, *Farming Smarter* positions itself to host new projects, apply for fresh funding, and keep its research relevant Puchinger said.

"Our goal is always to do research for farmers here in southern Alberta — relevant, unbiased work that can apply on their farm just as we've done it on ours." FS

Immerse Yourself in a Foreign Ag Adventure

The benefits of international agriculture travel

by Kristi Cox

In 2015, *Farming Smarter* took this group to Agritechnica in Germany. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

Have you ever hopped on a plane and immersed yourself in the agriculture of a different country? When we sit in our armchairs at home and read about what is happening in another part of the world, we see it through a filter that may not show us the full picture. When we have the opportunity to travel and engage with the locals living that story, we come home with new perspectives and maybe new ideas.

If you go with a group, you come home with new friends and deeper relationships.

Jamie Puchinger, *Farming Smarter* Assistant Manager has guided four international agriculture tours to Germany, the Dakotas, Montana and most recently Brazil.

"We get to tour and learn about what's happening in the ag industry in different parts of the world," said Puchinger. "It is interesting to see how they cope with challenges like marketing or shipping, but also the agronomy. How do they plant crops? How do the seasons operate and is there a water shortage? If so, how do they manage restrictions on irrigation?"

George Lubberts, owner and Crop Consultant with Complete Agronomic Services is an avid traveler. He joined *Farming Smarter*'s group trips to Germany and Brazil. Lubberts noted that what he observed in Brazil was quite different from most people's preconceptions.

"Every time you talk about Brazil, people talk about burning rainforests," said Lubberts. "But less than 10% of the land in Brazil is under agricultural production and most of the other land is protected. There's a lot more protection of the environment in Brazil than we have in Canada, as far as the land itself."

Discussions with local farmers can make us appreciate the challenges faced in other countries. Lubberts has also traveled extensively on his own. He explained that in travels to Thailand, the Philippines and Africa, he's spent time talking to some of the smaller farmers.

"Their biggest challenge is the lack of access to capital," said Lubberts. "Where people subsistence farm, if they need to borrow money, they're looking at 30-40% interest. In the Philippines, one person explained to me that they are charged 40% of the yield of their crop – so they take 40% of the rice. No wonder these people can't pull themselves out of poverty."

It's not just small farmers that face challenges, though. In Brazil, one farm the group toured spans 1.5 million acres and produces two crops per year. This requires a lot of resources and labor.

"They built their own village," explained Lubberts. "They built hydroelectric plants, churches and schools – full villages for their employees because it was so far away from anywhere else."

In Southern Brazil, the weather is so accommodating that farmers can grow five crops every two years, which sounds amazing. The downside is they have no winter, so pests and diseases prevent them from gaining the yields they might otherwise.

Some of the differences in practices, geography, government policies and weather are so different we can't really bring techniques home, but sometimes there are crossovers. In Southern Brazil they get up to 1.8 meters of rainfall each year, which causes a lot of erosion.

"One of the places we visited, Dijkstra Farms, was a pioneer of no till," said Lubberts. "He was quite involved not only in Brazil, but worldwide."

Alberta's erosion is primarily from wind, but producers benefit from no-till practices here as well. It's the same issue with different causes and the same solution.

There are similarities found for farmers in any country. Puchinger explained that they want to produce quality food or commodities and make sure they can pass along a farm to the next generation with quality

resources and financial stability. Just like we do here.

Another example of this similarity showed on Lubbert's first trip to Africa when Desert Storm was about to start.

"I sat down with some Muslim people in a village in Niger, and they had the same issues and concerns (we do)," said Lubberts. "How do I feed and educate my kids? How do I make my kids' life better than mine? It's the exact same thing we're all trying to do. The only way you really see that is by going there."

Lubberts talked a few people into going on these trips and encourages everyone to consider travel.

"I want to stress that if you want to broaden your horizons and your mind, and you want to really experience it, you need to smell it," said Lubberts. "Every time I go to a developing country and I smell the smoke from the wood fires used for cooking, I realize right away I'm there. You can see pictures here, and you can hear about it, but when you smell it, you've really been there."

Travel creates connections

"The idea is to create relationships with people in our community and for them to create their own networks and people around them, which is great," said Puchinger. "They get to learn not only from the people we visit and the farms and businesses we tour, but from each other as well. They can talk about what they do at home, what challenges they have and how they overcome them. Developing those relationships is tremendously valuable."

In early 2026, a group will travel to Australia and New Zealand. This trip sold out, but that doesn't mean you can't join a *Farming Smarter* tour. Puchinger is already hard at work planning the next itinerary.

"I have a preliminary package to go to Zimbabwe in 2028," she explained. "We want to create those once in a lifetime experiences every two years."

There are benefits to joining one of these all-inclusive tours.

"I've done a bunch of traveling on my own, but with a tour, everything's taken care of," said Lubberts. "I can concentrate on enjoying the actual trip and meeting the people rather than wondering where my next flight is, or where to find a decent restaurant that fits my needs - especially when I don't speak the language. It takes all that worry away."

In 2024, *Farming Smarter* took 22 Canadian farmers to Brazil. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

Watch www.farmingsmarter.com to make sure you don't miss your chance to "smell it." FS

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FARMING SMARTER

Turning Research Into Real-World Water Wins

by Kristi Cox

Lewis Baarda and John Kolk uploading a VRI prescription based on soil moisture sensors Credit: *Farming Smarter*

Irrigation shifted over the past decades from flood and wheel move systems applying heavy water applications every few weeks, to low pressure pivots with lighter, more frequent watering. This shift, along with shifts in weather patterns and potential water shortages, calls for updated research and technology to improve irrigation practices. Targeted research begins with determining needed solutions and answers.

"Some of our recommendations or approaches to irrigation are maybe a little bit outdated," said Lewis Baarda, *Farming Smarter* Field Tested Manager. "There's value in going back and looking at how we irrigate."

A big challenge for producers is how to balance the needs of individual crops with the overall capacity for farm irrigation. How many pivots can operate at one time? What is the power bill? Where should the water go?

"Suddenly the questions become a lot more complicated," said Baarda. "And our irrigation season is even shorter than our 120-day crop season. It's a lot to figure out in a short period of time. I think the biggest benefit to farmers would be to develop tools that help them make decisions. Something that keeps them informed on what's happening in the fields and helps them decide how much to water, where to water, and when to water."

Assessing crops for drought tolerance can help farmers make better use of irrigation water. Different crops have vastly different water needs. In times of water shortages, it's a balancing act between crop need and crop end value. Research could test the crop irrigation needs against the end value of that crop to help farmers make sound economic-based decisions about where to allocate water.

New technologies and systems may look attractive, but they need to be accessible to all users.

"We were probably one of the earlier people to bring variable rate irrigation (VRI) on our farm," said Aubrey Kolk, Farm Manager at Kolk Farms. "We wanted to see how valuable it was. But right now, we don't use it as much as we should."

Kolk explained that he's not as comfortable as some people with computers, so he doesn't use the capability of VRI on their 3,300-acre operation. His wish is for a simplified system, or one using AI that would optimize this for him. Research and development of such a system could help all end users adopt technologies.

Testing irrigation technologies independently on multiple sites could increase comfort with investing the money and time into adopting new technologies.

"Farmers might tell you they've been bitten once or twice from different products that they were sold (that didn't work out)," said Kolk. "It's important to have the research behind the technology so you can know how it improved something on the farm or gave an economical advantage to the farmer."

"Technology needs to be affordable, needs to be easy to use, have an acceptable return on investment, be adaptable and tailored to individual operations as appropriate, and have long term application," said Chris Gallagher, General Manager of the Lethbridge

North Irrigation District (LNID). "Farmers don't want to invest a whole bunch in a technology that becomes obsolete in three years."

It's not just the farmers who benefit from research. It's important for the irrigation districts to understand how their decisions impact farmers, especially in a low water supply year. Gallagher notes that water allocation (inches per acre) affects seed selection, crop rotation and input decisions, and this leads to more questions.

"What kind of lead time do farmers need to be prepared?" asked Gallagher. "What impact at the end of the irrigation season does a restricted allocation have on yield, the quality of the crop and markets?"

Gallagher explained irrigation districts work to ensure they don't use too much water in one year, which could put them in a bad position for the next, but it's a balancing act.

"At what point does risk management within the District start to infringe on risk management on the farm?" Gallagher asked. "If our farmers aren't successful, we're not going to be successful."

The LNID obtained an RDAR grant to help them adapt to the changing face of irrigation. They are using predictive modeling and operational tools to create a water management model.

"We're going to be taking that and using it to provide information to support our board members in their decisions on the amount and timing for setting the water allocation," said Gallagher. "They'll have a better idea of what water is available, what impact an extra inch has on reservoir supply and that type of thing."

While growing more crop per drop includes optimizing on-farm operations, Gallagher indicates the irrigation districts also need to investigate conveyance methods, automation, and controls. Districts need to know how to forecast water supply and demand as weather shifts and irrigation changes.

Water storage is another consideration with changing water needs

"Do we have enough storage capacity in the right places?" asked Gallagher. "We can look at that in terms of district-owned storage, the provincial storage and headworks system, but also on-farm water storage."

Both Gallagher and Kolk wonder if there will be a time when on-farm storage could make sense. As the irrigation season gets longer, it could provide a shoulder season source. Irrigation districts can't start too early and risk a cold snap damaging air valves and other above ground infrastructure. On-farm storage is a potential solution worth investigating.

Ideally, the industry will come together to get effective irrigation research results out to those who need them. Baarda points out that new irrigation methods or technologies are hard to evaluate on-farm without risk to the bottom line, but *Farming Smarter* can bridge that gap.

"We have some approaches that can help," said Baarda "And we have the time and energy to focus on that, while growers can focus on just keeping the water on. If they want to partner with us to do some of these evaluations, we are well equipped to do so." FS

Blown Away:

Cover crop research shows promise and challenge

by Craig Lester

Farmland soil erosion is not an issue to blow off.

With land now valued at over $20,000 per acre in southern Alberta and visible signs of valuable topsoil blowing from fields into ditches and neighbouring properties, it's become evident that this is a growing concern.

That's why *Farming Smarter* launched its Saving Soils project that researches a number of ways to reduce soil erosion through reduced tillage, cover cropping, living mulches and integration, and innovative crop systems.

The initiative looks to reduce erosion in regions where traditional tillage and high winds can quickly strip valuable topsoil.

"The goal of the program is just to stop the land from blowing," says *Farming Smarter* Executive Director Ken Coles.

Despite a lack of funding available for research projects like this, the *Farming Smarter* team pieced together philanthropic support from the Weston Foundation, RBC Tech for Nature, and Farmers for Climate Solutions to help pull it off.

Cover Cropping

Cover cropping shows promising results; however, it requires a balancing act when using this tool, which can protect fragile soils but also comes with risks if not managed carefully.

Coles emphasizes that cover crops are not a simple, one-size-fits-all solution and if they're not done right you will damage the crop.

"Cover crops are an agronomist's dream, because it's complicated. We're learning that even in our trials."

Moisture is often the limiting factor in southern Alberta, with the dry, arid conditions. While irrigation helps with this issue, the irrigation districts don't let the water flow until mid-May, leaving a short growing season where cover crops can compete directly with cash crops like canola, beans, or potatoes.

Research Insights

Farming Smarter tests fall rye seeded in late September at various research sites and terminated under different scenarios, including pre-seed burn down, in-crop spraying, and roller crimping.

Results are mixed. In some cases, yields drops significantly if cover crops get terminated too late. In others, such as dry beans, yields actually improved, an unexpected finding the team plans to study further.

Prior to the research, Coles was skeptical that the cover crops would be a benefit as they would steal valuable nutrients from the cash crop.

"To my surprise, the cover crops actually didn't compromise the yield unless we let it get to that longer growth stage," Coles explained.

Cover crops also showed benefits beyond yield. Flea beetle damage in canola reduced where cover crops provided soil cover.

"The flea beetle damage in this one is way less than without the cover and the flea beetles were bad."

Fall rye stood out for its growth, hardiness, and soil protection. Winter wheat, on the other hand, proved easier to kill, while spring barley seeded in the fall reliably winter-killed.

"Fall rye, I think, is the best option we have for a fall cover crop. It grows the most. It has the most aggressive, the best winter hardiness, but it does have an allelopathic effect when you kill it and it breaks down."

Timing remains a critical piece. Cover crops harvested early reduced competition with the main crop, while in-crop termination created shading and delayed canopy closure potentially compromising yields.

Coles underscored that successful adoption depends on careful agronomy and ongoing adaptation.

"You've got to be willing to put in the time and to understand the agronomic details and where you can get the wins."

The economics also play a role. While the potential is there, farmers must weigh input costs, seeding equipment capabilities, and risk management.

At the end of the day, Coles says producers are the ones taking the chances.

"I do think we have to take it with caution and I do think we have to respect that the amount of agronomy that we need to figure out to be confident in recommendations that we're sending out to farmers."

Knowledge Sharing

Cover crops in southern Alberta show both promise and peril. They can improve soil protection and even boost yields in certain situations, but missteps in species selection, timing, or management can do real damage.

Coles says the journey is about a willingness to learn, adapt, and test. For farmers, that means acknowledging the risks and the rewards of bringing cover crops into the mix.

One of the Saving Soil program biggest strengths is its role in extension. By combining multiple research projects under the Saving Soils umbrella, *Farming Smarter* created a clear platform for outreach and farmer engagement.

"We've made a flagship of this program for extension purposes. It's been beneficial to have all of the different trials within a single program. It gives us a good framework for focusing on the research ideas that we're doing."

Now that the program has hit full stride, *Farming Smarter*'s goal is to continue building on its successes and extending the knowledge to producers.

By focusing on practical conservation approaches, Saving Soils is not only advancing soil research but also ensuring that farmers have tools that protect soils while remaining economically viable. FS

Head over to farmingsmarter.com and search Saving Soils to see all our projects!

Easy To Use Smart Irrigation Technology

by Sean Kjos

A solar panel and weather station stand tall above rolling green waves of young barley. The instruments operate around the clock throughout the summer, recording data within this southern Alberta field for a team stationed around the world.

Beneath them, a lone summer student collects the data from this station and a nearby evapotranspiration sensor secured in a plastic, blue bin. This bi-weekly task is the only hands-on step in a project developing a system to automatically generate and deliver irrigation prescriptions to the hands of farmers.

The Smart Irrigation system uses an array of soil moisture sensors to monitor the current available in-field moisture. It compares this information with the moisture required for adequate crop development then contrasts it with weather reports tracking wind, temperatures, and rainfall hyper-localized to the field. Meanwhile, the evapotranspiration sensor builds a model of how much soil moisture has been lost and must be replaced.

All of this information gives the system an approximate moisture surplus or deficit the field, which is included in the irrigation prescription.

Irrigators receive this field prescription in an easy-to-read report through the LiteFarm platform – a free and open source farm management tool. The web app allows farms to set crop plans, assign tasks to employees throughout the season, and track updates from the field.

What began as an initiative led by the University of British Columbia's Centre for Sustainable Food Systems now hosts a community of farmers and collaborators in more than 155 countries.

LiteFarm leverages its users around the world to develop systems that improve farm operations and alleviate the mental load of decision making for farm managers. These include local projects to connect farms with each other to share knowledge as well as system-wide projects to develop new tools for its users – like the irrigation support project.

By the conclusion of the 4-year Smart Irrigation project, this irrigation management tool will be accessible to all of these users. It will support farmers of any scale and allow them to create field maps and receive a prescription for all irrigated fields.

From farm to computer

As early autumn dissipates the summer heat, the partnership of LiteFarm, Ensemble Scientific, and *Farming Smarter* prepares to scour data from a second field year.

The project's first year focused on the system; ensuring it collected and reported the appropriate information for the project. This allowed them to identify and fix any bugs encountered during the process. The team moved its focus from the field to the report and dashboard for the second year.

Farmers partnered with the project began to receive irrigation prescriptions through the platform. This feedback provided the team with insight into how users will interact with the tool.

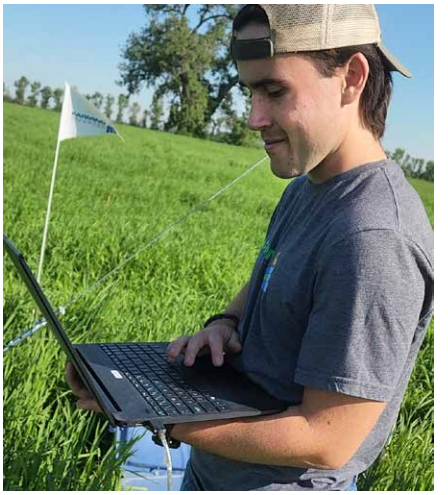
Product Lead Divya Chayanam and Software Engineer Joyce Sato-Reinhold from LiteFarm flew out to visit Lewis Baarda at *Farming Smarter*. Baarda took them on a tour of partnered farms for a firsthand look at the established systems in the field. This deeper understanding of the system helped to refine the program and support the team's focus for the next two years – create an intuitive dashboard and easy-to-read report for irrigators.

Development of the smart irrigation dashboard prioritizes function and form for the users. The team put a heavy emphasis on the most relevant information along with how the platform would display it.

Chayanam & Sato-Reinhold dedicated nearly an entire day to this review while visiting Alberta. Baarda and the pair from LiteFarm dissected each page to ensure everything from field maps and irrigation triggers to soil moisture profiles and sensor information were intuitive and relevant to the users.

Fielding the project

Setting the system up in-field is a simple and non-intrusive process. After seeding, technicians set up the weather station along with soil moisture sensors placed at various locations and depths throughout the field.



Christian Alloway collects weather data from a smart irrigation field. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

After installation of this equipment, irrigators can map out fields on the LiteFarm dashboard. This automatically connects the sensor array in the field to an account on the platform.

Next, the farmer selects a crop of choice from the dashboard's catalogue and creates a crop plan. The irrigator sets germination and harvest dates including seeding rates and the percentage of field seeded. This populates the crop plan with ideal timings for crop stages along with irrigation requirements.

The farm manager can edit, remove, or assign tasks. This is where users will find the irrigation management tool under tasks development through the Smart Irrigation project. Through it, they can schedule irrigation times and set a task for themselves or an employee to make sure the pivot starts.

However, the team hopes to automate this operation as the project continues into its third year. As the dashboard moves into the optimization phase, the biggest challenge left for the team to overcome is to breakthrough the barrier of communication between irrigation pivots and the system.

Tackling this obstacle requires cooperation from the pivot manufacturers. The team believes the LiteFarm platform will show its value to irrigators and manufacturers will recognize the value they stand to gain. FS

Scan to read more about this project

Extension Fragments as it Evolves

by Sean Kjos

Throughout the latter half of the 1970's, farms experienced dramatic growth as an optimistic economy elevated access to new equipment, better products, and innovative practices.

To keep up with this adoption, the federal and provincial governments increased support of agricultural specialists available to any farmer through a single phone call.

Each county across the Prairies had on-demand specialists who provided farmers with immediate access to resources and knowledge for any problem encountered. When they weren't fielding calls and assisting in fields, these specialists worked to identify the next needs for farmers.

They got ahead of farmer's concerns to research beneficial changes to crops, soils, and equipment. At the end of the project, producers had access to this knowledge – not just through the transfer of the research, but with hands-on learning to facilitate adoption and practice change.

This rapid expansion leading into the 1980s came at a high cost – the large price tags attached to land, products, and equipment meant farmers took on an increasing amount of debt.

As the needs of farmers grew alongside their operations, the emergence of private agronomists employed by companies rather than established public services began to take place.

However, the good times of the 1970s would not last long in the following decade of decadence.

A sharp spiral towards disaster

On January 4, 1980, United States President Jimmy Carter announced a grain embargo against the Soviet Union in response to the latter nation's invasion of Afghanistan just 10 days prior.

Grain prices collapsed overnight and would not recover from the 476-day embargo for years.

The accrued debt of expansion quickly plunged towards bankruptcy for many Prairie farms as crop prices fell, drought ravaged the region, and interest rates spiked above 20%.

Agriculture in the Prairies survived through government subsidies. By 1987, when the Farm Financial Crisis was at its worst, nearly all of the farm's net income on a Prairie farm was accounted for by these subsidies.

From 1980 to 1984, the average gross farm income without subsidies fell from $12,000 to $10,000 yet rose from $60,000 to $72,000 with the inclusion of subsidies. In 2025, the average farm's gross income would equate to $27,121.71 before subsidies and $195,276.32 after.

Even with federal and provincial governments supporting Prairie farms with roughly $4 billion [$9.57 billion today] through direct and indirect payment programs in 1987, subsidized gross farm incomes fell back to $60,000.

While the agriculture industry swelled to accommodate itself, the necessity of government funded support for technology & research transfer fell under scrutiny.

This economic strain meant governments had to cut subsidies or government jobs. A 1987 Economics Canada report cautioned against continued support for the industry at the then-current level and recommended a hard love style of support.

The industry would need to become self-reliant and learn to support itself.

Events provide guests with a chance to learn about on-going practice changes, new crops and equipment. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

Participants enjoy learning, networking, and good food at Farming Smarter events. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

The times, they are a-changin'

By 1990, farmers no longer had direct access to the agricultural servicemen, district agriculturalists and home economists. In their place, private companies and crop commissions filled provided technology and practice adoption.

Specialists of the government-supported system shifted focus as problems rose and fell in priority, the new specialists lacked that flexibility. These replacements brought crop- or product-specific information to the field yet weren't as effective with general agronomic advice.

Farmers bore the burden of navigating an ecosystem with siloed knowledge and agronomists who now sold supplies while providing advice with the same mouth and hand.

Soon the industry saw the rise of research associations that worked to fill the gaps between universities, commissions, and companies.

As the dominoes of change fell through the industry, agriculture in Alberta took on a new look come the turn of the millennia.

Industry specialists evolved from being a person you spoke with at an organization to an organization you trusted for information.

Jamie Puchinger, Jenny Seward, and Catherine Kerkhoff closely look at treatments in a 2025 diagnostic Field School session. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

Government research centers no longer had opportunities to share knowledge like they did in the past. Much of their research had become centered on projects with economic or environmental significance to the industry.

As each organization now had to share knowledge with the industry, a wave of new events swept through the region. This saturation became too much for a farmer to attend enough to stay relevant. As a result, agronomists and seed buyers replaced the managers and farm hands of larger farms at industry events.

While the opportunity for informal questions and discussion remained the preferred aspect of these events, the reduction of attendees across the board shook expectations and perceived value.

The cyclical and rhyming nature of history took over – akin to how specialized knowledge would move from the cutting edge to supporting the backend of the knowledge base, events began to cycle in and out of relevancy.

An eventual fallout of the slow, silo of information throughout agriculture meant that the value of public support grew less. With more institutions relying on decreasing resources, doing more with less became a staple for the industry.

Publicly supported events fell to the wayside regardless of the value to producers and agronomists. But as the nature of the industry changed, so too was the nature of the world.

A brave new world

With the advent of the internet and steadily increasing access to information and technology, farms underwent a modern evolution.

Young farmers inherited family farms with post-secondary degrees in business management, plant science or environmental science. The next generation entered the industry at a higher level of education and chase professional development.

Cell phones and social media paved a way for farmers to extend networks across county lines. A new model of specialists takes shape such as farmers and agronomists making careers online sharing how they solve farm problems.

It is now possible to connect to new ideas at any time, day or night. It is quicker to find solutions online or call "your guy" when the problem arose than to wait for the next event or sit on hold.

Peer networks grew stronger and knowledge is accessible with a few taps of the thumb.

As a result, the modern system of sharing information officially replaced the once cutting edge of support provided by government. FS

Agronomy Smarts Offers Huge ROI

by Sean Kjos

A sample of *Farming Smarter*'s network out in the field learning from research plots. Note Morton Molyneux capturing it all on video for subscribers to watch on farmingsmarter.com
Credit: *Farming Smarter*

"Your network is your net worth"

A phrase that signifies the value if your connections popularized by marketing and advertising guru Porter Gale as the title of her book.

Building a strong network of people you can trust and call on in a time of need is an element of success. It's easy to forget the value we gain from the community around us, as we often put an emphasis on being self-reliant.

Yet, community is a pillar of agriculture! Our entire industry is a demonstration of how important your network is; a farming stereotype founded on back and forth favours with your neighbours during seeding or harvest.

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Capital Grant Benefits Non-Profit Alberta Research Groups

by Lee Hart

Twelve Alberta research non-profits benefited from a one-time, $3.2 million capital grant from the provincial government in 2025. *Farming Smarter* received about $500,000 to buy several pieces of research-sized equipment that will support expanded research in all areas of study.

All indicators point to continued expansion of the well-established potato industry built around three major processors — Lamb Weston-ConAgra, McCain Foods and Cavendish Farms. There are about 150 registered potato farmers in Alberta producing about 30 million hundredweight of potatoes annually. Alberta produces about one quarter of Canada's potato crop but expects production to increase to meet processing demands.

"If you want to do proper research you need to have the proper equipment," says Carlo Van Herk, *Farming Smarter* Field Operations Lead. "To be able to grow a specialty crop such as potatoes, you need specialized equipment to be able to match a grower's operation"

The provincial grant contributed to a $700,000 shopping experience for *Farming Smarter* to source the field and lab equipment necessary for on-going potato research.

Machinery purchased includes a research size, two-row potato planter; a single row potato digger for harvesting; a two-row potato hiller to prepare fields for planting that also serves as early season weed control, and an inter-row tiller. The tiller can also do weed control in potatoes and on other row-crop research plots such as conventional corn and canola trials seeded on different row spacings.

To handle the new equipment, *Farming Smarter* also invested in a higher horsepower tractor. With existing machinery in the 55 to 80 horsepower range, they bought a 104 horsepower Fendt 210 tractor that powers through potato planting, harvesting and tillage equipment, along with other research projects.

To provide flexibility for potato research trials, the grant also helped fund two traveller hose reel irrigation units. Van Herk says the irrigation units can provide water to potato research trails conducted on previously dryland fields.

Carlo Van Herk drives the new, more powerful tractor added to *Farming Smarter*'s equipment through a provincial capital grant. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

On the lab side, as *Farming Smarter* evaluates crop yield and quality, new equipment includes a potato washing unit, equipment to measure the specific gravity of potatoes — an important measure of potato quality and a Smart Grader used to size, weigh and count potatoes.

New shop for SARDA Ag Research

Near Donnelly, Alberta about 45 minutes south of Peace River, SARDA Ag Research received some $344,000 in provincial funds to build a $350,000 unheated storage shop.

"The main thing is for the shop to provide storage and shelter for our research equipment," says Vance Yaremko, SARDA executive director. "It will also be a multipurpose building we can use for research activities and summer events."

SARDA was headquartered in nearby Fahler for many years but outgrew older facilities in that community. About two years ago, the association made the move to Donnelly Corner. Phase one of the move involved building a new shop and office and phase two now involves building the shop for machinery.

The new building will be a 60 x 120-foot pole structure covered with sheet metal and outfitted with overhead doors. For the time being it will have a packed gravel floor, with eventual plans to install a concrete floor down the road.

"It is important to have a proper shop to protect field equipment," says Yaremko. "Even in just the past year we've noticed an increase in maintenance cost as equipment was outdoors for one winter."

The new shop will house a research sized swather, harvester, seeding equipment, trucks, trailers and tractors. "All machinery is expensive, so we do our best to keep it protected and make it last as long as possible," he says.

The new shop which will have power but no heat, will also provide space as SARDA hosts visitors for site tours and seminars.

"Having these funds available is a huge help to our program as we continue to provide research and extension services to producers in this area," says Yaremko. FS

Jan Slaski Goes Independent

by Mike Raine PAg (HLM)

Jan Slaski in his element educating people about the diverse uses of hemp at *Farming Smarter*'s Open Farm Day. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

This fall, Jan Slaski retires from public service at Innotech and moves to a consulting role as he continues what became his life's work. Slaski started his own hemp consulting company, Mirabilis Hemp in Edmonton.

As he reflects on his 32 year journey that led to global recognition in agricultural hemp, he says it still seems "surprising how that turned out."

"I was a wheat guy in Poland" he said. But hemp threads soon wound through Slaski's work binding him to Canada and its farming.

In September 2025 after 27 years, Slaski retired from Alberta's InnoTech research institute he made home to the nation's hemp research with a 13,000 sq. ft. fibre processing pilot plant facility.

Journey to Canada

Slaski came to Canada as a post-doctoral to take a position at University of Alberta (UofA).

"It was an opportunity to gain some international experience and improve my English. I could read it for scientific papers, but couldn't speak it," he said.

The Polish scientist joined a research group where the lab director spoke German, so Slaski believed his abilities and a desire to succeed would be enough. After a year he and his young family returned to Poland and a prestigious role, with his own lab and technicians, in a research institute that included a rare perk in that country, the ability to get an apartment.

Through a twist of fate, his UofA supervisor took sabbatical just before Slaski arrived in Edmonton. He got through the year with the support of colleagues and email connection with his supervisor. When the year ended, his supervisor asked him to stay rather than return to Poland.

"We had a great opportunity in Poland. In Canada, the government wouldn't allow my wife to work, but I had a job here and it was great experience for a young scientist at a prestigious international university," he said. It became obvious Slaski's family would have to choose Canada or Poland.

They applied for landed immigrant status in Canada deciding that if he didn't get a career opportunity that year, they would return to Poland.

A few months later InnoTech interviewed for a researcher's role, but he lacked the legal ability to accept work in Canada. It curtailed an offer and the Slaski family began thinking of Poland as inevitable.

Then, a surprise letter granting the family landed immigrant status arrived months early. Although too late for the job offer, another surprise landed when Innotech called and offered him a job.

"I remember I was standing and I sat down hard on a garbage can." His family chose to stay in Canada.

Journey to Hemp Expert

Slaski started his career in manure surprised that in Canada it was waste while in Europe it was a farm commodity. Its relationship to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change became important to governments at the time. It was in that vein that Slaski began exploring forestry and crops that sequester carbon dioxide. Hemp emerged as a cropping option that would sequester or offset emissions and potentially deliver seed and fibre harvests for producers.

"I had no plans to be in hemp, but research investments were possible and farmers wanted alternatives that weren't wild boars, ostriches, elk, lamas and alpacas," said Slaski.

Hemp production grew in Canada as producers sought new crops after weathering long periods of low profitability in the 1980s and 1990s. In the Vegreville region, Slaski worked with livestock and grain producers looking for alternative crops.

"Manure also led me to very long drives to places like Lethbridge, but also across western Canada. Great experiences for an agricultural scientist. You learn a lot and get a lot of ideas travelling through these vast farming regions," he said.

Hemp presented as a challenge venture 25 years ago and his job became educating growers, elected officials, the public, and regulators about hemp.

"Initially, it was really funny, because, you know, we'll be smoking your t-shirt. It's nonsense. It's lack of education. Did I mention elected officials?"

It was the elected officials that were some of the hardest to attract to a hemp field as they feared seeing photos of themselves in a hemp crop.

"It was politically dangerous for them, even ag ministers," he said.

For millennia people around the world grew hemp for its nutritious and energy packed seed and useful fibres. But its relationship to marijuana and a 60-year cultivation prohibition in North America made deregulation an obstacle.

The Alberta government wanted research leading to carbon emissions offsets supporting its petroleum industry. It needed a new cropping alternative for cash-strapped farmers.

Slaski found the growth area of science he sought. Prior to COVID Slaski made 25 to 30 presentations in Canada and around the world annually on the role hemp could play for farmers, processors and end users.

"The past eight to 10 years even ag ministers will speak about it from the front of the room, but it took a lot of education to make that possible. Farmers, they are most skeptical but also the most curious," said Slaski.

"It takes a lot of field days to convince them. And then, like any crop, a lot of learning how to grow it properly," he said.

"We had to show farmers not only how to grow, but when to harvest seed and fibre. You get two crops, but not at the same time," he said of the fibre and seed components.

> **"The past eight to 10 years even ag ministers will speak about it from the front of the room, but it took a lot of education to make that possible. Farmers, they are most skeptical but also the most curious.**
> **— Jan Slaski**

The Alberta government's adoption of hemp led to Innotech at Vegreville becoming home to the world's only production-scale pilot plant for fibre processing and decortication. It can work with hemp and flax. The facility processes cropped materials for companies looking to expand the use of renewable fibre products. From automotive parts to reinforced concrete, the facility arose out of Slaski's research program and Canadian farmers willingness to take some risks with a new crop.

Health Canada eventually semi-deregulated the crop making hemp reliably profitable. It took research into plant breeding to ensure the right genetics for the Prairies.

Producers easily recognize growing pains of alternative crops. For hemp, promised fibre plants failed a few times and the cannabidiol (CBD) trend led to overproduction of seed led to a wave of producer skepticism. Recent development of a private sector decortication facility in Alberta and major Canadian seed trials focused on improved and approved varieties stimulate farmers' interest again.

Slaski remains convinced that the ancient crop has a future in agriculture as food, feed, chemical elements and fibre.

"We needed to look at all aspects of a crop's life and we have," Slaski says. However, good research is continual he points out.

In retirement, Slaski won't hang up his lab coat or trade-mark stylish jackets. He will continue part time as a scientist in Portugal, as a leader in the Canadian Hemp Trade Alliance, and "discover and educate" for years to come. FS

Scan to read more about hemp projects

Career Catalyzer For Agriculture

by C. Lacombe

2025 student research technicians and Farming Smarter mentors. Back left to right: Peyton Smith, Ariana Duerksen, Tatum Adair, Christian Alloway, Lewis Baarda, Camryn Wojtowicz, Jamie Puchinger, Mike Gretzinger, Sean Kjos, Evrett Krippl, George Joseph Junior, Tristan Jacula, Thierry Fonville, Rori Ryan, Ashley Wagenaar Front left to right: Allison Baptista, Travis Petker, Levi Harasem-Mitchell, Brady Vucurevich, Braydon Oostlander. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

Farming Smarter provides young people a potentially life-changing opportunity through student summer jobs and internships. This isn't a blowhard boast, but a dawning realization brought on by past students talking about the impact working at *Farming Smarter* has on their careers.

"Having *Farming Smarter* as my first position allowed me to see every different, possible avenue in agriculture. It has such a wide scope of research. We did everything from variety trials, efficacy trials for spraying, population trials, fertilizer trials, just a wide girth of everything," says Megan Robbins, Nortera Foods Agriculture Manager. Megan spent 18 months with *Farming Smarter* as a research intern starting in 2017.

Now, she manages a farm and farmer contracts for Nortera Foods in Lethbridge.

"I manage about 3,000 acres of processing peas and almost 2,000 acres of sweet corn that gets packaged for frozen goods at a plant in north Lethbridge," she says.

Jay Anderson, Lantic Sugar research agronomist, also talks about how the variety of tasks he did, skills he picked up and interests that got piqued changed his trajectory all the way back in 2005 when *Farming Smarter* was still Southern Applied Research Association (SARA).

He recalls how he started college in plant and soil science with no intention of going to university. After working with SARA for two seasons, he changed his mind.

"I never had the intention of doing a masters degree. If I hadn't worked at *Farming Smarter*, I wonder if I would have ever pursued more schooling," he says. Jay has a Masters in plant sciences, specifically weed ecology, from University of Saskatchewan and rejoined *Farming Smarter* in 2012.

Jay acknowledges that working at *Farming Smarter* influenced his career aspirations and opened his eyes to his love of research. His current role gives him the ability to address challenges local growers identify to the Lantic team through its on-farm connections.

"Definitely the research side of things is where I feel very comfortable and happy," he says.

Brent Nicol, President CanGas Propane, joined the team in 2012 while SARA and SACA (Southern Alberta Conservation Association) were officially becoming *Farming Smarter*.

"*Farming Smarter* was a great launching pad - 100%. I'll yell that from the rooftops," says Brent. Ken Coles recruited him.

"He brought me on at a pretty key time of my overall growth personally and professionally. Through his leadership style, he gave me the opportunity to go out, take charge of projects and make mistakes. He let me build upon those mistakes and get the best out of myself and put me in a position to succeed," Brent reflects.

Brent found he developed strong skills in people management, public speaking, project planning, proposal building and follow through.

"Those are all key things that led into my leadership style," says Brent. Ken is the first leader that gave me some 100% foundational knowledge," he says.

Each of these individuals went on to work with multiple organizations/companies as they progressed in their careers. All of them at some point, returned to *Farming Smarter* as industry representatives working with *Farming Smarter* for their companies. They presented at events or collaborated on research projects.

They all also credit *Farming Smarter* with leaving lasting impressions on them and their careers.

Brent Nicol continuing the tradition by passing on his knowledge to a group of young people.

Megan Robbins scouting a farmer's field for Nortera Foods in Lethbridge.

"Every time I've interviewed for a new position, the first thing people ask me, 'Oh, you worked at *Farming Smarter*?' They like to see it on my resume and I'm very proud of it," says Megan.

Jay recalls that he connected with Hector Carcamo PhD because he found an unidentified bug in a field.

"Actually, I discovered the first cereal leaf beetle in Alberta. There were these slugs on the flag leaf of the oat. I was out one day looking at our plots, making notes and observing things. And I'm like, 'what is this weird slug thing?'"

That started an investigation that included Ross McKenzie and Carcamo who identified the slug. The next year, the adult beetles were everywhere.

"I thoroughly enjoyed my time there and it was a good experience," says Jay.

Meanwhile, Brent found his way to leadership and now he leads a team of just over 100 at CanGas Propane with 16 satellite locations and full branch locations across Western Canada.

"I'm in the saddle and the saddle is made-up of a hell of a team." FS

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Businesses, Farmers And Researchers Prosper Together

Weave your business into southern Alberta's strongest agricultural innovation network

by C. Lacombe

We display Smart Partner logos in a prominent location all year where the over 2,000 visitors to our site see them without fail. Credit: *Farming Smarter*

Farming Smarter began a special partnership program in 2021 to enhance communication and networking among farmers, agri-business and research. Called the Smart Partner program, the goal is to build a knowledge and cooperation network to ensure agriculture thrives in southern Alberta.

According to three long time participants, the program works.

"We support *Farming Smarter* because *Farming Smarter* supports farmers and agriculture and that's a big priority for us," says Ken Vanden Dungen, Director Corporate Client Group (Agriculture) at Royal Bank of Canada (RBC). "We have similar goals to support the agricultural community."

"We really like what *Farming Smarter* does in agriculture with research and innovation, but also the chance to network and socialize with people in the community," he says.

Vanden Dungen explains that RBC is in the business of providing value to farms and Agri business - not just lending, but numerous advice based opportunities and services. What makes the *Farming Smarter* audience valuable is the opportunities to be in front of people, to network with them, build trust and rapport with people in the agricultural community,

"That is a very valuable thing to be able to do that," he says.

> **We support Farming Smarter because Farming Smarter supports farmers and agriculture and that's a big priority for us.**

Real Agriculture is a media company based out of Lethbridge that provides news and information for producers, agri business, corporations, and anybody involved in agriculture.

"The fact that *Farming Smarter* is based in the same area means it aligns really well with us," says Christianna Bach, Real Agriculture Executive Assistant & Sales Coordinator. What you do and what we do dovetails nicely," she says. We love the opportunity to support *Farming Smarter* in its work because it also supports us in our work.
It's a good mesh and mutual benefit."

AJM Seeds Owner, Adrian Moens says, "*Farming Smarter* is an organization that knows what it's doing - third party, unbiased information and great information for farmers." That's holds a lot more value to the farmers.

"It's a pleasure to work with the team there. Sometimes, it's a little tougher to find time to do it. But by the same token, whenever I do find time or do different events it has a good outcome."

Moens has about 15 years of growing collaboration with *Farming Smarter* and is in his third and final term as a *Farming Smarter* Director.

He started by donating small amounts of seed for research projects as early as 2010. When he bought a drone, he practiced crop

scouting at *Farming Smarter*, which is mutually beneficial. Moens also makes a mean brisket and sells them to select clients. *Farming Smarter* gets to be one of his customers for special staff lunches.

Vanden Dungen counsels that successful partners must allocate time to take advantage of the opportunity the partnership provides.

"As a partner, it's one thing to say 'we support you,' but, if we don't show up for anything, then that's not very good support, he says. The staff are very good at open communication. There's never confusion or anything."

Bach says Real Agriculture has a variety of different platforms to share information and learned very early that you can't tell people how to consume content.

"If you only make yourself available in one spot, you're only going to get a very small, subset of the available audience," she says. We consider Farming Smarter another platform of audience that we don't necessarily hit across our own channels," she says.

"We deal mostly with Communication Director Claudette Lacombe," Bach says. She's very responsive, easy to reach anytime I have a question and quick on the draw." Bach also said that Assistant Manager Jamie Puchinger and Communication Coordinator Sean Kjos are also excellent and, while she doesn't speak to other staff often, whenever she needs to connect with a staff member, they are all very responsive.

Moens also appreciates that working with Farming Smarter is easy.

"If I have questions or comments, I usually get an answer and good direction. Also, the staff are friendly," he says. "The staff are a text and or a phone call away."

While the Smart Partner program focuses on intake for the next year October to December, it's open to any business that want to try it at any time. Just contact Lacombe to learn all about the program. Find her on the staff directory page of farmingsmarter.com.

Each of these partners agree that it's an excellent program to expand your reach if you're a business that wants to connect to Alberta's agriculture community.

"I would say for anybody looking for a practical partner, somebody with knowledge of the industry who is interested in increasing that knowledge in various ways, innovation specifically, Farming Smarter is a good fit for that innovative, boots on the ground partner," Bach says. FS

Scan to read more about this program

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