

Chronically Underfunded, Regional Agricultural Research Still Yields Important Data for Farmers

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Manitoba Harvest, Canada's largest hemp seed retailer, sent a team to tour Farming Smarter's hemp trials back in August, 2017. Photo courtesy of Farming Smarter

By Claudette Lacombe, Farming Smarter

While we doubt you think about agriculture research as often as we do, we'd like you to think about it now and, maybe, take a small step to act in its favor.

The federal and provincial governments have a program that funds agriculture research in Canada. The program was called Growing Forward, but is changed to Canadian Agriculture Partnership (CAP) and a new five year agreement between federal and provincial governments starts April 2018.

In Alberta, we have a fund called the Agriculture Opportunity Fund (AOF). Its sole purpose is to fund 12 regional agriculture and forage research and extension groups in the province. Farming Smarter is one of those groups and is spear-heading a campaign to get the provincial government to use CAP funding to double the AOF grant to regional research groups.

The campaign has 15 major supporters of the idea imploring the provincial Agriculture Minister to make this happen.

The reason regional agriculture is important is that conditions vary across geographical areas and what might work in Lethbridge County is a bust in the Peace Country.

Farming Smarter at Lethbridge and SARDA Ag Research in the

Peace Country InnoTech Alberta scientist Jan Slaski out of Vegreville, to test hemp varieties. The three locations (Lethbridge, Vegreville, and Falher) worked with about 12 hemp varieties.

One key difference between Lethbridge and Falher, AB is daylight during the growing season. Up in Falher, the hemp grew faster and moved through growth stages quicker due to the additional length of the days. Slaski expressed surprise at how fast the plants grew in one week.

However, down in Lethbridge, the hemp varieties get about 10 extra frost free days to mature. Although the plants spent a little longer at each stage, the southern crop ended up with a better yield. Of course, it was also irrigated in Lethbridge; which may or may not be a factor.

The project received three years of funding. Those three years Falher had some drought one year, got hailed out another year and then ended up soggy with rain in another year. But that is the very nature of agriculture isn't it? The best agronomic practices to grow hemp in Alberta would benefit from more years of trials and probably more test areas.

But the funding ran out! Hemp has the potential to add a profitable crop to the rotations of many farms. It is also an environmentally sound option for many products that are currently non-biodegradable. It provides both food and fiber to extended industries. Hemp also provides lots of organic matter to the soil because of its large root system. Finally, for now anyway, hemp doesn't have a lot of pests, so doesn't require much pesticide.

Bringing a new crop in a rotation requires a lot of research, which is not possible without funding and we want you to help us to get this research funded.

Alberta's research and forage associations collaboratively working with Municipalities and providing the unbiased information to local producers in their mandate areas.

They are the communication channel among government agencies, industry and local producers to open new markets for our commodities and make our whole country prosperous.

The campaign is called Regionally Connected Agriculture – Apply, Adapt, Adopt. Call your local MLA and tell them you want AOF funding increased as proposed by Alberta's research and forage associations. If you're the type, a written letter would be fantastic.