

Farmers look to rebound from tough year

Tim Kalinowski

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Farming Smarter's annual winter conference kicked off Wednesday and ends today at Exhibition Park.

Under the dark clouds which have hung over the industry for much of the past year, Ken Coles, general manager for Farming Smarter, said the annual conference was trying to present to participants some potential silver linings which they could take away with them as they begin to plan their 2020 crop year.

"It's a good opportunity to get together and share what we have learned over the past growing season, talk politics, talk markets, and try to share as much information as we can, and get some good networking going," stated Coles. "There has been some big market issues over the past year, trade issues with China and other countries, so this is the time of year when we think about what we are going to be growing and where for the next year. Even though it was a really tough year, sometimes those are the years we learn the most. I think there is a good opportunity to pick up on what went wrong and try to tweak management practices for next year."

Keynote speakers on Wednesday included former Wildrose Party leader Danielle Smith, respected agricultural advocate Alanna Koch and veteran market analyst Mike Jubinville.

Jubinville said he wished he could share better news with those in attendance.

"There are always a number of market drivers for grain prices," he explained. "It could be weather, supply and demand issues, oversupply in various parts of the world that help drive things, but in the 30 years I have been doing this the influence of politics and political interference into commercial grain marketing activities has probably been as significant an influence in the grain markets as anything I have ever seen."

Jubinville pointed to President Trump's "America First" policy and subsequent tariffs as having given permission for other countries to also interfere in the normal flow of grain markets for their own me-first political agendas as well.

"With trade wars and such, the flow of the rivers have changed, if you will. This has created an element of uncertainty in the marketplace, and uncertainty breeds fear, and fear breeds selling," he said. "That weakness, and overhang in the marketplace created by political interference into the markets, has had a dampening effects which goes beyond what normal supply and demand would have suggested otherwise. That overhang is still with us today, and I think continues into 2020."



Alanna Koch, board chair of Global Institute for Food Security, chair of CN Ag Advisory Council and PIC board member, speaks to farmers and industry partners about leadership and advocacy in agriculture, Wednesday, at the Farming Smarter 2019 conference. Herald photo by Greg Bobinec @GBobinecHerald

Jubenville said farmers were going to have to remain agile, watch markets closely, and be ready to jump when the market bounces prices up over quick spurts in time.

Meanwhile, politics on the homefront also haven't gotten any easier with the election of a minority government, explained former Saskatchewan deputy agriculture minister Koch, not for farmers already feeling effects of social licence concerns related to their industry. The only way to prevent potentially damaging domestic policy changes, said Koch, was for the agriculture industry to get out in front of things.

"A national effort is underway to pull the agriculture industry together," she explained, "and this has been done in a very concerted way throughout the last five years or so with an intensification of these efforts in the last two years. Things have really ramped up. Industry, with the support of many of the provincial governments, as well as the federal government, have created various initiatives to get the message out about the benefits of agriculture."

Koch said consistent messaging about the benefits of agriculture, education of youth to prevent misinformation from spreading, and industry-led efforts to create best management practice guidelines were all key ingredients in the soup of raising national awareness and education levels about agriculture.

"We know there is little connection to farming for most Canadians now, and it's vital that we reach people when they are young, and therefore open-minded about learning more," she said. "Agriculture in the classroom targets students as well as teachers, and using curriculum linked to agricultural education to reach this key, target group."