

Plot Hop discusses problems, future for agriculture

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At Farming Smarter's annual summer Plot Hop held in Lethbridge County on Thursday, eight presenters spoke on the agronomic problems facing southern Alberta's agriculture industry today, and also shared their visions for the future.

One of those presenters, University of Manitoba plant scientist Yvonne Lawley, garnered a lot of interest for her research on what may be the future of agriculture in North America with the increasing use of cover crops to overwinter and in shoulder seasons like early spring and late fall. Cover crops are planted either simultaneously with cash crops just after, or just before, to fulfil a particular purpose like increasing soil health, dealing with alkaline areas, preventing wind erosion, or creating pollinator habitats on the unused margins of farmlands.

Lawley is conducting a four-year plot study with Farming Smarter in Lethbridge to determine how best to use cover crops like red clover, fall rye or barley to enhance soil health and create other positive environmental impacts.

"These cover crops can meet a wide range of goals farmers might have," Lawley said. "Every farm has a different rotation, a different sequence, different equipment, and you are the only person who can decide what your goal is. I can talk about what some other goals are, but only you know what is going to fit into that complex matrix which is your own cropping system."

Later in the day Charles Geddes, a researcher at the AAFC research station in Lethbridge, talked about a scary trend in increasing herbicide resistance in common weeds like kochia, and what might be done about it. Geddes offered some contemporary spraying and non-chemical control trips to help reduce or treat instances where herbicide resistant kochia establishes itself in fields, but he also voiced an intriguing question for Plot Hop attendees: what if we start seeing kochia as a new feed species for cattle instead of as an enemy to be eliminated at all costs?

"It actually has quite good feed value, similar to alfalfa, so a lot of growers are feeding it," he confirmed. "They are basically bailing it up and offering it as feed for cattle, but we do know some of that seed may even remain viable through the digestive system of cattle."

Geddes hoped to determine through his research that happy medium where the kochia plant has not yet produced viable seed to spread itself all over the field, but still has a good enough feed value to be taken off or grazed out as such.

"Initially we weren't looking at the feed value of the kochia at different cutting dates," he said, "but we put that in for this year to look at that."

Farming Smarter general manager Ken Coles agreed the underlying intent of the annual Plot Hops in Lethbridge and Cypress County was to offer a window not only on what agriculture is, but also on what it might one day be.

"For me, it is a great opportunity to share with everyone, first of all, what we are working on, but honestly, most importantly, to find out what the issues are and what the opportunities are. And it ends up being the needs assessment that helps us to determine what kinds of projects we are going to apply for in the first place."