

## Alberta to start consultations on ag research

### *Applied research groups are concerned about future funding availability from the province and from commodity groups*

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By Barb Glen

The future of agricultural research in Alberta is under review.

After campaigning to increase focus on farmer-led research, the provincial UCP government will undertake consultations in coming months with the goal of getting “better research outcomes for farmers.”

So said Alberta Agriculture Minister Devin Dreeshen, who plans a series of meetings with commodity associations, applied research groups, post-secondary institutions and private sector research organizations.

“Something that we campaigned on in the last election was a move away from what the previous government did towards government-led research and government priority research (and move toward) farmer-led research. So in changing that mindset, it has opened up this research consultation,” said Dreeshen.

One applied research group, Farming Smarter based in southern Alberta, sounded an alarm last week about research funding.

General manager Ken Coles said he feared some commodity commissions plan to reduce or cancel funding for the group’s research projects. He said the Alberta Pulse Commission pulled its funding from the group after spending \$50,000 last year and he worries that other groups, notably Alberta Wheat and Alberta Barley, could reduce research dollars as well.

“We just have been pushed down on the priority list in what they’re able to support,” said Coles. “I’ve worked with the staff of the commissions and we have a long relationship and it’s been fruitful, it’s been a great partnership. But I do believe since the government cut ACIDF (Alberta Crop Industry Development Fund) and ALMA (Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency) and all that other stuff, the commissions have been restricted in their own budgets.”

Last week, Dreeshen eased one worry for applied research groups by confirming continued funds through the Alberta Opportunity Fund. The groups have shared the \$1.5 million fund for more than two decades and the amount hasn’t increased over that time.

Dreeshen said Nov. 4 that AOF money will be forthcoming, but only in the short term. Its future will rest on the outcome of upcoming consultations.

Dianne Westerlund, manager and forage agronomist with the Chinook Applied Research Association (CARA), said core funding through the AOF is vital.

“We can’t work entirely on our own. We have to partner with various people and the core support from the province is critical to make that all happen,” she said.

CARA gets financial support from municipalities and commodity groups, as do most other applied research associations in the province.



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“We’re told now that some of those commissions have less money to work with and I know we did get less money in 2019 than we had in 2018 from a couple of commissions,” Westerlund said. However, CARA’s funding from Alberta wheat, barley and beef commodity groups is stable so far.

Applied research groups have also been directed to access \$2 million in project funding through the federal Canadian Agricultural Partnership program.

However, those funds are often dependent on matching dollars and finding those can be difficult, said Nora Paulovich, manager of the North Peace Applied Research Association (NPARA.)

“Our concern is, there’s so much matching funding that we could get backed into a corner and not have enough matching dollars through CAP,” she said. There are also concerns than support previously provided by municipalities, including the County of Northern Lights in NPARA’s region, might be threatened because of cutbacks they’ve sustained elsewhere.

Paulovich said all applied research organizations submitted a request to the province some time ago to have AOF funding doubled and subject to renewal every five years instead of every three, but nothing came of it.

She, Coles and Westerlund all said they wonder if applied research groups will be expected to fulfil research roles now managed by Alberta Agriculture, given budget cuts to that department.

“You have to assume with the cuts that were proposed that there’s going to be a lot less actual work being done by the government themselves on primary production,” said Coles.

Preparatory to consultation sessions, applied research groups and commodity groups have been asked to prepare white papers on their research needs and desires, said Dreeshen.

“Those types of submissions are helpful because we ultimately get a more detailed understanding of those organizations’ positions,” he said.

Direct input from farmers is also sought, he added.

“It’s fascinating when you actually get into the research conversation with farmers because they have really great opinions and ideas of what type of research should be done, and I think that comes from a lot of windshield time that farmers get.”

The consultation schedule has not been set but Dreeshen said ideally a new plan for agricultural research would be developed in early 2020.

Coles said the outlook for applied research groups will be murky until then.

“I think there’s just a ton of unknowns right now. The only thing that we do know is that there is an intent to make some pretty significant changes. And there is an intent to work with us. That’s positive.”