ORGANIC PULSE GROWERS FACE SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT MARKETING CHALLENGES FROM CONVENTIONAL GROWERS

Alberta's rising number of organic pulse growers must all grow their pulses in a similar way to meet the criteria for being certified organic, but how they market those crops can be quite different.

Rodney Friesen, owner of Aspen Acres Organic in Fort Vermilion, grows organic yellow peas. He said that while a major challenge of growing organic pulses is weed control, marketing is also an issue.

"This year markets have been down a bit, so we sold the crop to probably half a dozen different brokers," he said. "We need more research into where our product could be marketed more. Most farmers are pretty savvy in the agronomic side so help with marketing would be most beneficial."

Five years ago, Friesen took the opportunity to purchase bush land in Mackenzie County that had never been farmed, which made growing high-value organic crops an obvious choice.

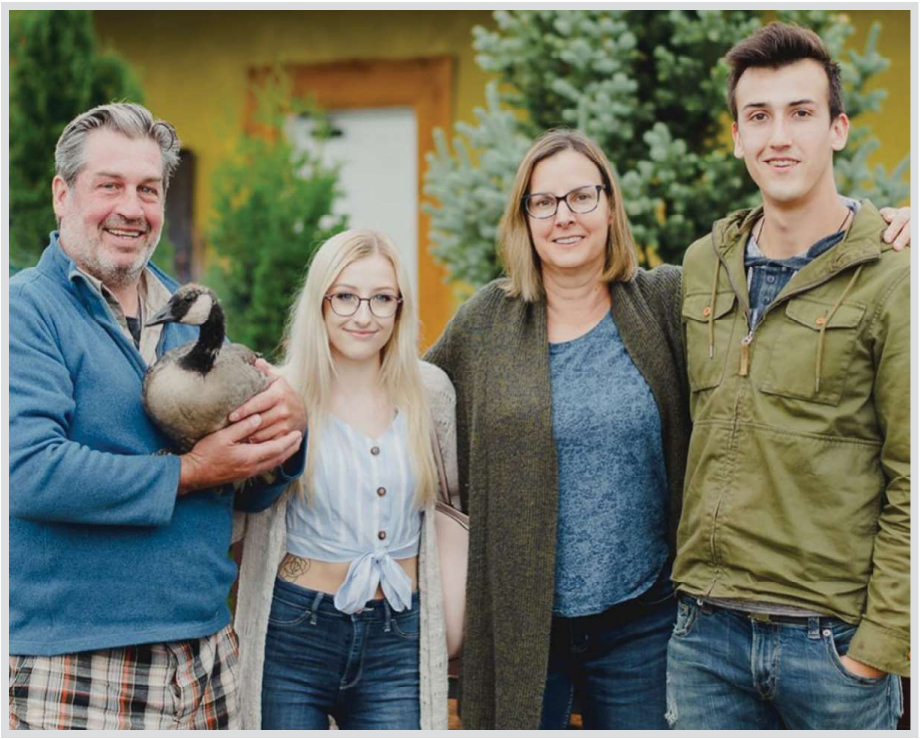
"The land was cultivated right away and there was less weed pressure because it was new land," recalled Friesen, who has farmed for 12 years in total.

Alberta Pulse Growers (APG) recently experienced a significant increase in the number of organic pulse farmers becoming members of the organization by paying the service fee.

"I think there's a lot of value in APG membership which we as farmers don't always see," Friesen said. "The

Harvesting organic yellow peas at Aspen Acres.

Organic yellow peas growing in summer 2019 on Friesen's farm in Mackenzie County.



All members of the Schneider family help out in the growing and direct marketing of Gold Forest Grains products.

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– Rodney Friesen

commission is out there advocating for us."

APG's membership currently includes 126 organic growers who paid $138,844 in levies last year on 23,530 tonnes of pulses sold, which were primarily peas. Organic growers do not make up a very big percentage of APG's 6,500 grower members, but the increase from a handful of organic growers in recent years is worth noting. There are more than 20 organic buyers listed on APG's online Dealer List to accommodate these growers.

As noted in a story in the Fall 2019 edition of Pulse Crop News, Organic Alberta also experienced a steady overall increase in its membership over the last few years, with part of the growth taking place in pulse production. APG and Organic Alberta are working together to identify future research projects that would benefit organic and conventional pulse growers.

Good prices related to a growing demand from consumers is a big reason for the increase. Much of the growth in Alberta also comes from a significant amount of land that hadn't been farmed before being sold in the Mackenzie County area of northern Alberta, where Friesen farms.

Meanwhile, John Schneider of Gold Forest Grains markets his lentils, peas and other grain products directly to consumers through online orders and the Old Strathcona Farmers' Market in Edmonton.

"The typical organic producer in Alberta is not going the direct-to-consumer model," said Schneider, whose central Alberta operation has been certified organic since 2007. "We're tiny with just 100 acres in pulses. The typical organic producer is not going to be bothered selling one kilogram packages of peas, whereas we do that."

Schneider said he farms the way his grandfather did because he believes it is good for the environment, but he shares a major challenge with conventional pulse growers in the lack of processing facilities in Alberta.

"The challenge is how to grow these varieties and have processing facilities in place to handle these crops," Schneider explained. "We can grow lentils really easily, especially if we intercrop them with soft wheat or peas, but sometimes seed cleaning plants don't have the time to mess around with separating crops."

He said that he has developed a strong relationship with the Morinville Municipal Seed Cleaning Co-op Ltd., where the plant operators go out of their way to help him get his product cleaned. However, there is still a dire need for processing facilities in the province.

"The demand for organic pulses is there but we sort of struggle a bit," he explained. "The biggest challenge for organic growers is the lack of processing facilities in Alberta. We need food processing companies located in Alberta that we can sell to, such as pulse flour plants and falafel plants. Unfortunately, if somebody starts up a food processing plant in Alberta, it probably isn't going to be organic based."