AUSTRALIAN AND CANADIAN PULSES – COMMONWEALTH COMPETITORS OR SCIENTIFIC COLLABORATORS?

By Nevin Rosaasen, APG Policy and Program Specialist

Australia and Canada are two of the largest pulse exporting nations of the world. Both countries have very similar histories, are members of the Commonwealth, have resource-based economies, and share many similar challenges. They share growing urban centres, declining rural populations, and citizens of both countries are now further removed from their agricultural roots. Primary agriculture voices are fading into the noise and representation is declining due to the democratic and electoral processes. The challenges are almost identical between our countries when it comes to today's consumers, foreign or domestic. There also exists in both countries a mistrust of agricultural practices, increasing market access issues pertaining to maximum residue limits, as well as fear of GMOs and new breeding technologies.

A field tour included a history of the introduction of lupins as a crop in Western Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. The 1990s saw the arrival of Anthracnose and the need to find resistance. Yield improvement research made lupins a staple crop for Australia.

This past October, I was fortunate to have been invited to give a keynote at the Australian Pulse Conference in Horsham, an agricultural centre in the Wimmera growing region of Victoria. This was the third conference of its kind taking place every three years. The conference brings together pulse crop researchers, breeders and agronomists to share their current research, discuss setbacks and challenges, make connections and talk collaboration. The day before the conference, 250 people attended a pulse focused field day showcasing herbicide research, new varieties and the like, not dissimilar to what you would witness at a field day here in Alberta. Plots of lentils, lupins, chickpeas and faba beans were on display, complete with an Australian barbecue and hundreds of chickpea patties, prepared by the field day organizer Dr. Jason Brand and his wife. Brand and I first met when he and a group of Australians travelled to Canada in 2018 to meet with fellow researchers to gather a better understanding of Canada's pulse industry. I was humbled to be invited to give the opening keynote address in October. I focused on our two countries, not as fierce pulse export competitors, rather making the case that Canada and Australia should become closer scientific collaborators.

Competition is deeply embedded in all of us from an early age, whether through sports, our education system or in business. One can argue there is a cutthroat mentality when it comes to how we engage with those around us. I often hear the same rhetoric when discussing weather woes taking place across the globe that may have an impact on prices. Australia is often considered a rival when it comes to crop production, and what is bad news for their production is good news for our price outlook. Some may even argue the same degree of competition exists between neighbours, competing for land or cash rents, even delivery opportunity at the local elevator. Foreclosure across the road may just be opportunity knocking. I can't disagree that production shortfalls in one area

Rosaasen gave the opening keynote address at the Australian Pulse Conference 2019.

of the world may increase world prices, or that quality challenges experienced here in Canada may result in slight premiums for a quality Australian crop. A neighbour's misfortune may also mean that you finally purchase that quarter section you have been closely watching for the last decade. Is this the extent of the relationship between our two countries or neighbouring farms? The 2019 harvest season would suggest otherwise with many farmers pulling onto neighbours' fields to lend a hand before the snow and rain arrived or when there was a break in the weather. So, what does it mean to compete?

The origin of the word *competition* or *compete* is from the 17th Century Latin root *Competere*, which meant 'to strive alongside one another for the betterment or attainment of something'. The word has lost some of the importance of working alongside for the betterment, and competition has more of a 'drive your competitor out of business' ring to it these days.

During my keynote, I emphasized Australia and Canada as two of the five or six breadbaskets of the world that share more in common than any other regions. The former Soviet Union region – Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Russia – and South America, also major exporting regions, are commonly referred to as competitors in the grain industry. What differentiates Canada and Australia from these other export regions is our strong regulatory, research and institutional capacity and our consistent crop quality. The US has a trump card so to speak in that its ag sector can rely on battleship diplomacy to force market access, not to mention a large treasury that doesn't shy away from issuing farm payments when market forces suppress farm cash receipts. Large transfer payments and political clout are an area where Canadian and Australian farmers are not on similar footing with our American counterparts.

The EU has arguably removed itself as a major exporting region due to its conservative approach to assessing crop protection products and reluctance to allow new, innovative breeding and technological advancements to address pest and climate challenges. The EU has been increasingly holding other exporting regions hostage to lower and lower limits of detection and a precautionary approach to the

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environment and human health, a so-called hazard-based approach. I made the case that the Australian and Canadian pulse industries have more to gain by sharing research findings, communicating to consumers and encouraging our regulators to explore information sharing on risk assessments, adherence to CODEX and closer alignment of MRLs when it comes to trade.

Despite efforts in the area of maintaining public trust, consumers are increasingly concerned about the impact their food choices have on the planet. Citizens are also worried about the potential impact of pesticides on the environment and question the trace residues in food and their potential for adverse human health effects. Canadian and Australian pulse growers are arguably the most sustainable and environmentally conscious in the world, largely due to our strong institutional and regulatory capacity. Indeed, there needs to be a balance in ensuring protection of the environment and the ability to continue to produce food in the least impactful way using sustainable methods. This is an area where regulators, scientists and researchers need to work harder to ensure the broader public understands differences between risk, and specifically Acceptable Dietary Intake and hazard – trace residues measured at parts per billion that represent a trade risk, not necessarily a risk to human health.

Many in the ag sector recognize that scientific literacy in the era of fake news and social media represent one of the largest challenges to maintaining public trust. This is an area where Canada and Australia can work in a coordinated effort – to strive alongside each other for the betterment of the industry, in the attainment of these common goals. Frost tolerance in lentils, drought tolerance, new modes of action in herbicides, breeding and genetic marker techniques and other research discoveries – these are only a few techniques and innovations that represent potential advancements for all pulse growers.

As Rosaasen travelled between Sydney and Armidale in New South Wales, he stopped near Goonoo Goonoo and couldn't spot a blade of grass. He noted that almost every community he visited was in a water crisis and many parts of Australia are in severe drought.

Plant breeding, the role of both public and private, was also a topic of discussion and a chance to exchange ideas, discuss models and explore solutions to common problems. The erosion of public funding to research in agriculture is another common challenge in both countries.

Travelling across the states of Victoria and New South Wales, I was blown away witnessing the drought conditions, wildfires and water shortages, the front line of the climate crisis so to speak. One may argue that my flight across the Pacific only increased emissions and it would be doublespeak to suggest that we need to take action on climate change. Fair enough, guilty as charged. Making connections, engaging in dialogue and discussing ways to work together on common issues is very difficult to initiate via Skype or Facetime, yet may soon become a reality. Face to face connections, networking and building personal relationships is still a reality in business, and very important in the research and scientific community.

For the Canadian and Australian pulse industries, we are far better off to look for ways to work together to achieve common goals than to be hoping for drought conditions Down Under or reciprocally, railway disruptions on the Prairies. Our industries will be more resilient and better off in the long run if we can continue to communicate research findings, recognize ways to work together on our common challenges and explore new ways of advancing the interests of pulse exporters on both sides of the Pacific.