THE EVOLUTION OF ALBERTA PULSE MARKETING OVER 35 YEARS

By Blair Roth, P.Ag.

Blair Roth (right) and co-worker Tim Mugford with Alberta Pool examine a lentil plant in the late 1990s.

As the Alberta Pulse Growers Commission celebrates its 35th anniversary, it takes me back to 1989 and earlier when the pulse industry in Alberta was just trying to find its footing. Dryland production of peas and lentils in Alberta was nearly nonexistent in the late 1970s. It took extensive research, development and courageous innovation by farmers to realize the potential of pulses as a great diversified crop rotation, a cash crop opportunity, and an alternative to the Canadian Wheat Board control.

A small group of dedicated farmers aimed to establish an irrigated dry bean industry in southern Alberta in the early ’70s. They strived to provide a cash crop for irrigation that would reward growers for their hard work and expense. At that time, value-added crop opportunities for irrigation growers were limited, and dry beans were one solution to this issue. Early adopters used Idaho-bred pinto varieties that were full season, very viney, and highly susceptible to sclerotinia white mold. During this period, we often wondered if we could ever achieve an average yield of 2,000 lb per acre.

Both scenarios presented numerous challenges. Weed control, modifying harvest equipment, finding better adapted varieties, and matching quality to the market demand were the top priorities. The focus on breeding better adapted varieties for Alberta conditions proved crucial in the long term. Semi-leafless pea varieties with better standability, small red lentils with herbicide tolerance trait and standability, and earlier dry bean varieties with improved upright architecture and seed quality have all contributed to our progress.

However, ensuring a market pull for all three of these commodities was essential to close the circle and ensure profitability for pulse growers. This challenge continues to this day!

The introduction of semi-leafless pea types to Alberta generated significant interest. These varieties had better standability and yield potential, and were easier to harvest than the old Century types that went flat at harvest. Initially, the demand came from the international and domestic feed markets. Given the quality we produced, this was the best opportunity to ensure the product moved at a decent value and could use conventional shipping channels.

As pea breeders developed better standing, more disease-tolerance, higher-yielding and consistent seed quality varieties, interest in food quality use for Canadian peas grew exponentially. This growth coincided with increasing demand from Asia and the opportunity to market yellow peas through the conventional grain delivery system and ship via bulk grain vessels. The rest, as they say, is history.

Our success with dry peas led to three major concerns today: *Aphanomyces* root rot, enhanced by short rotations and wet years; the erosion of Canada's dominance in dry pea export markets in recent years due to high prices encouraging more competition from alternative production areas (ie. Russia); and political tensions affecting our relationships with India and China, the two largest markets for dry peas. The industry remains focused on addressing these issues while diversifying markets and crop rotations.

Before the arrival of red lentil varieties, the lentil industry in Alberta struggled to gain a strong foothold due to weed control challenges, disease issues in wet years and grading problems with green lentils. The release of CDC Maxim in 2007, combined with the growing demand for small red lentils, led to a surge in Alberta lentil acreage from 20,000-30,000 acres per year to over 400,000 acres in a typical year. Red lentils had fewer grading issues, available herbicide tolerance, good standability, and improved yield. And they could be marketed through conventional grain marketing/bulk vessel system and container marketplaces. With continued improvements in varieties, red lentils have become a viable crop option in many parts of Alberta where drought stress promotes seed production.

In the 1980s, bean growers in Alberta used Idaho-bred pinto varieties that were full season, very viney and

Bean harvest in southern Alberta.

highly susceptible to sclerotinia white mold. During this period, achieving 2,000 lb per acre yields consistently seemed challenging. Today, bean growers in Alberta are growing five different market classes and aiming for 3,000 lbs per acre yields, thanks to three main factors:

1. Entrepreneurial growers who continuously strive to produce the best, highest yielding and most economic product.
2. Focus on breeding locally developed varieties, which have contributed to earlier maturing, better plant architecture, improved disease tolerance, higher yields and better seed quality.
3. A focused marketing effort that has built a brand of consistent high quality, demanded by markets worldwide.

The dry bean industry has become a valuable crop alternative for irrigated land in southern Alberta.

As we look to the next 35 years, there are significant challenges and opportunities. Political interference in an open market remains a threat to the industry's success affecting market access — a dream for any merchandiser to have free access to all markets. While we sustainably grow the best pulses, market protectionism often hinders our progress. Additional concerns and opportunities on the horizon include the EU's push to reduce pesticide use, finding solutions to root rot concerns (alternative pulses such as chickpeas, faba beans and lupins are potential solutions) and encouraging more patient capital for developing the plant protein marketplace. Increasing our domestic value-added use of nutrient dense pulses for the pet food and human markets will help stabilize the industry and support future growth. I believe this will partly involve incorporating pulse flours and proteins into existing products and not necessarily as whole pulse products.

Pulses are a core rotation crop in a sustainable farm plan, providing great nutrition at a low environmental cost. The future is bright, but we must continue to focus on market access, value-added opportunities and maintaining strong breeding programs in Canada.

Blair Roth's favourite pulse dishes are lentil lasagne and Alberta Bean baked beans.