



BEING AT THE TABLE



By Reg Warkentin, Government Relations and Policy Manager, Team Alberta Crops

Whether it was prehistoric people organizing into groups to avoid predation, or the rise of trade unions in 18th century factories to improve working conditions, people are wired to organize into groups. Trade associations, and in this case the crop and beekeeping commissions, were created to organize farmers, provide key services and ensure Alberta farmers have their seat “at the table.”

Policy changes made without informed dialogue and consultation with affected parties is incredibly disruptive to farming operations and you don’t have to go far back for examples. Everyone remembers the calamity following the recently elected NDP’s rollout of their farm safety legislation, the now infamous Bill 6. Lack of consultation and poor communication resulted in a piece of legislation that had operators fearing for the future of their family farm and created a massive

backlash that included countless protests.

While farmers were clearly disappointed they were not consulted on the bill, I suspect the political battering the NDP received made their regret much worse. The highly segregated farming community came together wholeheartedly and demonstrated there is more than one way to get your “seat.”

After getting their spot at the table, the farm groups were able to suggest a series of amendments that the government would mostly accept. While the changes did not address all the concerns, it would make the bill more tenable for many. Much of this change was made possible thanks to the collaboration and consistent messaging the farm groups presented.

I believe similar comparisons can be drawn to the 30% fertilizer emissions reduction target, as again the government made an announcement without clearly communicating about whether the reduction was absolute or mandatory, any acknowledgement of past gains in efficiency or what the baseline is. From the recently released “What we heard” document, we saw farmers and farm groups mobilize to push back on the surprise announcement.

The feedback received by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) was overwhelmingly aligned with those presented by Team Alberta Crops and the many other like-minded groups and individuals that took the time to provide thoughtful grassroots feedback

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about the countless measures already taken to maximize efficiency and promote sustainability. In bold lettering, Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau stated the targets **“ARE NOT MANDATORY”** and the document included many points about promoting voluntary adoption and education regarding BMPs without curtailing growth in crop yields.

This is a positive revelation for many reasons, but more than anything it demonstrated what happens when farmers get their seat at the table. Within the document, AAFC reported the number of submissions and where they originated. Incredibly, and with great credit to the drive and advocacy of Alberta farmers and their farmer-governed organizations, 39% of individual submissions and 34% of organization-based submissions originated from our great province.

Another example is the government’s review of the



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National Safety Codes pertaining to large agricultural buildings. Recognizing that “farm buildings are of low-human occupancy” and mostly used for cold storage, the government of the past exempted agriculture buildings. A decision was made to review whether this exemption should continue. Fortunately, this time around, the Safety Codes Council and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs opted to consult and communicate.

Farmers knew that most buildings are already engineered to protect family, workers, equipment, livestock, etc. but also to meet other overlapping requirements

that might include insurance, municipal codes and other regulatory groups such as the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. More importantly, the National Codes would have required costly and nonsensical measures such as sprinkler systems that would never have sufficient water pressure. Again, farmers organized to provide feedback to the Government of Alberta. Team Alberta Crops, our counterparts in livestock and many others petitioned the government with real-world, grassroots feedback and meetings with government officials. At a recent Rural Municipalities of Alberta meeting, the Minister for Municipal

Affairs announced that Alberta would continue to exempt large agricultural buildings from National Safety Codes.

Without question, there is a lack of understanding about the ins and outs of farming that often results in poorly designed policies that aren’t reflective of modern farming and economic realities. In a country of 40 million people, we have less than 2% of the population growing 98% of the food we consume. Likewise, most elected representatives and bureaucrats come from urban backgrounds, and this is exactly why agriculture’s seat at the table is so important.