

Alberta Oat Growers Commission looking to become reality

BREEDING ▶ It's hoped that an Alberta oat commission will be able to pressure the federal government to bring an oat breeder to Lacombe



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Members of the Prairie Oat Growers Association (POGA) are hoping to have the Alberta Oat Growers Commission (AOGC) up and running by April 2012.

POGA president Bill Wilton told a meeting here last month that getting a Prairie-wide oat organization has taken several years, starting with a meeting in Ituna, Sask. in 1998. Selling memberships to farmers proved difficult. "A lot of people just don't like selling memberships, and as a result, they struggled greatly in the first few years," he said.

The directors realized the only way to provide sustainable funding was to establish an oat check-off, but commodity checkoffs are under provincial jurisdiction. "We started and discovered that each province had to go its own way," Wilton said.

In order to establish an oat growers commission in Alberta, the Alberta Agricultural Products Marketing Council needs assurance the proposed organization has made an effort to contact producers, who must vote in favour to establish the

group. "We're in that stage now and we have encouragement and believe that in 2012, we will get this done," said Wilton.

Once AOGC is established, they will be part of the activities of the POGA, which collaborates with the two existing provincial organizations.

"Funds will stay in Alberta. They go to AOGC from the people who collect the funds, that being the people that you sell your oats to," Wilton said. The checkoff is refundable. Funds will be used for research and development.

The AOGC has created a business plan that encompasses 2011 to 2013 and hopes to have the first checkoff by May. Six growers from Alberta are on the steering committee for the proposed commission. They will serve on the interim board of directors once the AOGC is approved.

Shawna Mathieson, executive director of POGA, said the goal in creating the Alberta commission is to have a united voice for the oat industry. Once AOGC is established, POGA will represent over 85 per cent of Canadian oat growers. Wilton hopes an Alberta oat commission will be able to pressure the federal government to bring an oat breeder to the Lacombe research station.

"Oat breeders are employed by the federal government. The number is down to one in Western Canada, from five when I started with POGA six years ago," said Wilton. "The positions have not been replaced."

The current oat breeder is located in Winnipeg, but also oversees a small breeding program at Lacombe. "It's not as much of breeding program and it's become more of an evaluation site. We think that's wrong and we think there's an opportunity there. There's much more testing going on in Saskatchewan and Manitoba than there is in Alberta and part of the reason for that is funding," said Mathieson.

Wilton said POGA has turned \$350,000 from producer funds into \$2.1 million, thanks to support from federal government and industry support. "Once the Alberta organization is in place, we will have the names of everyone who delivers oats commercially in the three provinces," said Wilton. "Think about the leverage that we can have for shared funding, when we can say to Agriculture Canada that we represent some 18,000 to 20,000 oat producers in Western Canada who are prepared to support a



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BILL WILTON

research project with some of their own money, and they're looking to their government to help with the project."

Lost markets

POGA is currently doing studies as part of an equine feed oat study project. One of the partners is the University of Kentucky.

"Since the early 1990s, we've lost over 60 per cent of the pony oat market in the U.S.," said Mathieson. "We're spending some major money in getting industry support to try to get oats back into that market."

The market was lost when the price of oats was higher than the price of corn, so many feed mills changed to use corn in

their rations. Wheat middlings, a byproduct of wheat milling, have currently replaced both oats and corn. "This equine feed is a huge thing for oat producers," said Wilton. "We have no advocate that sells our oats. We don't have anybody selling our product, just people accepting orders."

Wilton estimated the oat market has lost about 700,000 tonnes of demand from the American equine industry. "The biggest reason is because we let it happen," he said. "If we don't stand up and do it ourselves, it's not going to get done. We have to encourage people to use our oats, find out where the market has gone and how to correct it and get the oats down there."

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