

Western Producer, January 21, 2010 Edition

"It will take an integrated approach by all stakeholders to develop a thoughtful and effective long-term strategy to attract new people to become the farmers of the future."

AI Scholz



Attracting farmers | APAS study - Wanted: new entrants to farming biz

*The following is an excerpt from a November 2009 report by consultant **AI Scholz**, commissioned by the Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan, to investigate the need to attract new entrants to farming. [Reprinted by permission from the Western Producer]*

The objective of this study was to provide an overview of the intergenerational transfer, new entrant attraction and immigration programs offered across Canada with recommendations for Saskatchewan.

It became obvious, early in the study, that there are no quick solutions evident in the existing new entrants programs across Canada or internationally.

Improving the atmosphere and climate to attract new entrants to primary farm production is a complex and long-term process....

Evidence from previous program evaluations indicates that the more successful programs provide incentives and support for business training and succession planning, which pays long-term dividends over a life time, rather than using direct financial grants, which can distort the marketplace.

Beginning farmer programs with financial assistance have had mixed results. Low interest financial support for land and equipment tends to be a one-shot approach and is usually capitalized into land or other assets with little long-term impact.

The magnitude of the need for new entrants to replace retiring farmers is illusive. Some farm leaders believe it is an urgent need and others feel the situation will resolve on its own.

Nevertheless, the average age of farmers is increasing and the number of new entrants is declining.

Saskatchewan is one of the few provinces in Canada that does not have a specific program aimed at supporting beginning farmers within the ministry of agriculture. This is an opportunity to start with fresh ideas and programs.

There are opportunities for Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan, as the province's general farm organization, to work with the Saskatchewan ministry of agriculture to develop new entrant programs — the right kind of programs that are cost-efficient and effective and that make a positive difference.

While the need for action is apparent to the agricultural industry, other groups are lobbying for governments to be good stewards of the public purse and support the economy only

where necessary, plus there are concerns about a growing provincial deficit and pressure to reduce spending in the current and upcoming budgets.

The agriculture and food sector is also changing quickly, driven by new global competitors, trade restrictions, climate change and consumer demands for (local) foods that are safe, healthy and nutritious.

It will be important for new entrants to have the business skills and marketing abilities to adapt to continuous change to be successful.

In the past, there was a general belief that farming was the best option for those who couldn't finish high school or do anything else, whereas today, the skill sets and competencies required of a successful farmer are astounding and surpass the capabilities of many professionals.

The entry skill sets required of a beginning farmer are much higher today. Government and industry support programs must help attain the required business skill sets as the first priority.

Recommendations to governments for policy changes and programs must anticipate the needs of the industry five years or 10 from now.

If new inter-generational or new entrant attraction programs were planned and initiated in April 2010, it will take several years for tangible results to flow out of the pipeline.

Therefore, the needs five or 10 years forward must be anticipated, rather than developing programs on the needs of today that are based on the past five years experience.

While attracting new entrants to farming has been identified as a near crisis situation, there is a leadership gap in addressing the challenge.

Who takes the lead? Another way to ask the question is "who has the most to gain or lose in farm ownership transfer?"

Government has a role in policy and legislation but it is only one of several key stakeholders.

Industry itself must take leadership responsibility to meet the challenge and to seek solutions.

There is no silver bullet to attracting new entrants of all ages to agriculture. Unfortunately, the findings did not identify one solution or even two solutions.

It will take an integrated approach by all stakeholders to develop a thoughtful and effective long-term strategy to attract new people to become the farmers of the future.

By Al Scholz

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