

Certainly change ...but uncertain as to what change

by Hugh Maynard

A conference on agriculture and technology was organized by Agriculture Canada in Montreal in early June. Entitled "Partnerships: A focus on technology", the conference brought together representatives of government, farmers, food processors, agri-business, institutions and consumers to examine the role technology will play in Canada's agri-food sector in the next decades. As well as hearing numerous speakers from these representative groups, delegates also participated in workshop sessions covering the three themes of the conference: competitiveness, food quality/nutrition and environmental responsibility.

Predictably, conference speakers addressed the need for changes in Canada's agricultural sector. Jean-Jacques Noreau, Deputy Minister for Agriculture Canada said, "We must recognize the need for change." However, what those changes should be and how they will come about (and at what cost) appeared to be more rhetorical than practical. Gary Fread, Vice president of Campbell Soup Co., noted that essential elements of change were a commitment to competitiveness, a unified Canada and environmental sustainability. Adding value to food exports was his solution to becoming more competitive. Adding value at home to this country's abundant renewable resources would be the best way of conserving that wealth and thereby creating a sustainable environment. From the "sustainability of industry in Canada" would come forth "the protection of the environment." He said that "to some this may sound like a contradiction, but think about it . . ." From the lion will come forth sweetness?

The federal government's solution has been to create yet another committee to study ways to come up with solutions. In this case, the newly formed Agrifood Competitiveness Council was announced to the conference by federal agriculture minister Bill McKnight. The Council is to become a private sector advisory group that will help federal and provincial governments develop a more competitive environment for the agri-food industry. "One of the Council's most important tasks will be to identify ways and means for Canada's food processing sector to stimulate investment in new technology with a view to reducing input costs" said McKnight. The implication appears to be, amongst several scenarios, that farmers can expect lower prices for their product in order to make industry more competitive overseas.

Expectations

With more study, more development and more preparation for change in the offing, what is it that farmers can expect? Clay Gilson from the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Guelph, in the most intellectually challenging presentation, summed it up succinctly: uncertainty. "During past decades, one could anticipate, with some confidence, future events for the industry; past trends and events were a reasonable indicator of future possibilities. When change did occur, it was gradual and incremental in nature; one had time to adjust. During the decade of the eighties, however, fundamental changes in both the national and international area created enormous uncertainty within the entire agrifood system. Past trends and circumstances no longer appeared to be relevant. During the decade of the eighties Canadian agriculture appeared to be cut off from the past and isolated from the future" Gilson said during the opening address.

This gap between past and present Gilson termed "discontinuity" and he characterized it by describing numerous phenomena that are driving the uncertainty of to-day: globalization in travel, communications and trade, driven by computerization, automation and the trans-national state of economics, business and other issues such as development and the environment. These are the driving forces of change that Canadian farmers will have to deal with.

No standing still

Even still, the best Gilson could offer was, as phrased by Noreau, "the status quo is not an option." There will be change, but the outcome will be far from certain; some of the changes will likely be, according to Gilson:

- Funding of the Canadian agricultural system by government will diminish; government's ability to solve problems through increased spending will be severely limited, the private sector will have to play a role;
- Global competition is here to stay, Canada will have to find ways to stay in the game;
- Transnational ecological issues will force national economies into more sustainable forms of development;
- Inter-provincial trade barriers must go in order to form a common market that can provide economies of scale;
- The private sector will need to be innovative and creative in terms of new forms of business structures and commercial arrangements;
- The knowledge industries will have an increasingly important role to play.

Gilson also had three, very closely related and important suggestions to help the Canadian agri-food system deal with change. The curricula of agricultural colleges needs to be changed and a more holistic approach to education needs to be adopted. "Could it

be that undergraduate students, regardless of their level of specialization, could benefit by some exposure to such fields as environmental law, international business and foreign languages?" he queried.

Secondly, a reconsideration of our current approach to research must be undertaken, presently dominated by the "contract and service" approach of an applied nature. Gilson noted that the shift away from purely basic research in the 1970's was a good thing, but that to-day the pendulum had shifted too far towards applied research.

His final suggestion was the creation of a 'Futures institutes that would become a national centre of expertise "in a constant state of intellectual ferment, challenging the conventional wisdom in the Canadian agri-food system." The institute would develop continuing scenarios of probable changes, projected one and two decades into the future.

With so much uncertainty around, one is left to wonder with just how much certainty any such projections can be made?

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