

Editorial

A vision for the Prairies . . . and beyond

The Prairies are dying, and the rest of the Canadian farm community may not be far behind. Even with \$4 billion from the federal government going to support grain and oilseed farmers on an annual basis, the West is in awful shape. There does not appear to be a promising future for the region in this era of agricultural overproduction.

The U.S. has already taken 78 million acres out of production and placed them into conservation reserve programs. The anticipated excess cropland in the U.S. will be 150 million acres by the year 2012. Grain is not in demand in the Western hemisphere as it once was; people are eating less meat while meat production is getting more efficient, resulting in less grain consumption. High quality red wheats are less in demand for bread manufacture due to advanced processing technologies that can now utilize higher yielding soft white wheat. These varieties can be just as readily grown in other geographic regions, and with technological advancement in the Eastern European nations, even greater surpluses may arise. The out-dated notion that Western Canada is the bread basket of the world should be buried if there is to be a recovery, based on diversification, in the farming sector.

If foreign and domestic food markets are saturated, markets for surplus agricultural capabilities have to be found elsewhere in the economy. One market with quantitative potential and ready for a new raw material source is the domestic transportation fuel market. Canada is rapidly losing its energy self sufficiency in the oil sector, with imports forecast to rise to \$5.5 billion per year by mid decade. As well, Canada is searching for clean burning and low CO2 loading liquid fuel substitutes. Canada could - and should - divert a significant portion of its surplus agricultural production capabilities towards growing energy feedstocks to replace oil imports.

Ethanol derived from herbaceous (greenplant) biomass holds tremendous potential in meeting Canadian gasoline requirements. Significant research has already laid the foundation for the commercialization of this industry. The U.S Department of Energy has identified switchgrass, a warm season, perennial grass as the most promising herbaceous biomass species. It has high yield potential and requires minimal energy inputs. It can be grown in most of the temperate areas of North America and is native to Ontario, Quebec and the southern Canadian prairies. At the same time, the conversion technology for herbaceous biomass is rapidly advancing in both Canada and the U.S. It is expected to become

cost competitive with world oil prices within a decade. Ethanol technology appears to be already a lower cost option in terms of investment, than many new Canadian oil developments such as Hibernia. All indications point to federal government financial support being more economical - and beneficial - for ethanol derived from biomass, than the double subsidy now being paid for increasingly uneconomical grain production and expensive new Canadian oil projects.

There are many reasons why the time is right to develop an ethanol industry derived from Prairie tallgrass: it would put back into production millions of acres that are currently fallowed; it would remove from production the most marginal grain producing areas; it would create large numbers of permanent jobs in disadvantaged rural areas; it would reduce soil erosion and improve wildlife habitat; it would take Canada on the path to reducing CO2 emissions. As important as all that, however, it would enable the Prairie farmer to once again make a positive contribution to Canadian society, rather than becoming increasingly dependent on government support payments; it would set new roots for something called Prairie Pride.

The potential to re-establish 35 million acres of tallgrass prairie, replacing all of Canada's gasoline requirements, exists. It represents a new vision for the Prairies. It has the potential to not only rebuild the Prairie economy but to rebuild the productive soils from which those rural economies originated. It is an approach that sees agriculture not as a social and economic problem, but as a major solution to some of Canadian society's most significant concerns: energy security, global warming and rebuilding rural communities. It's time to bring back the prairie, it's time to bring back Prairie Pride.

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