

From the president's desk

It was two years ago this month that I quit my job as an agricultural input salesman due to concern as to where agriculture was heading. I didn't see any future in helping to build an input intensive system which was increasing surpluses, subsidies and soil and water degradation while reducing farmer self reliance and the long term capacity of the land.

To try to better understand our farming problems I traveled in Europe for four months evaluating high and low input agricultural systems at both the farm and research levels. It was surprising to visit many governmental research and educational organizations dedicated to a more biological approach to agriculture. I felt that there was a real need for similar types of institutions in Canada. However, on the practical level, the massive subsidy programs in Europe created two extremes in farming: main stream agriculture with the very high input approach where farmers were basically bribed to overuse farm chemicals and overproduce (400 lbs of nitrogen/acre on grasslands and ten trips over wheat fields wasn't my vision of what efficiency in agriculture was all about). At the other end of the scale were organic farmers who usually had lower yields and were forced into charging premiums to maintain the same profitability. This group was much more resource conscious but was also a real minority in the agricultural community. The integrated low chemical farmers were also few in number because of the lack of financial incentive.

Back in Canada low commodity prices had hit the cash crop and wheat farmers of the West. While corn farmers in Ontario and potato farmers in the Maritimes were also experiencing hard times. I thought of the good farmers I had met on my old sales route like Lloyd Kalbfleisch and Harry Wilhelm out of Tavistock Ontario, who consistently produced good corn and wheat yields at less than average cost. They did this as part of a well managed farming system, there was no continuous wheat or row crop production. It seemed that the only way in which agriculture would see better times without increasing the subsidy surplus syndrome was by reducing farm expenses through more resource efficient farming methods. High cost farming was no longer economically or environmentally attractive. It had moved agriculture too far from its biological base. The future was in resource efficient agricultural production (REAP).

The first student REAP group became a reality with the help of undergraduate and graduate students at Macdonald College in Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec in January of 1986. As for my own research project, it was back to Tavistock to work with Lloyd and Harry and some of my other former customers to find practical solutions to reducing farm costs; REAP on-farm research and demonstration was born.

The REAP group at Mac realized the importance in creating an alliance in Canada between farmers, researchers, government, students, extensionists and conservationists. We would call this alliance the Regenerative Agriculture Association of Canada (RAAC). A grassroots group dedicated to improving farm profits and productivity while minimizing adverse health and environmental effects.. Interest grew in REAP and in November '86 we held our first conference at Macdonald College.

Main stream agriculture is slowly moving towards regenerative farming practices. There is more interest in finding solutions which lower farming costs, reduce chemical use, stop soil erosion and other environmental problems. Solutions such as: the reintroduction of forages in our farming systems through new management techniques including intensive pasturing, heap and round bale silage making methods, and corn forage interseeding. Using rotary hoes, row crop cultivators, herbicide banding, cover crops and new crop rotations to control weeds are all a part of regenerative farming. On the research level the need to develop new nitrogen fixing, soil conserving, on-farm protein legume crops such as lupine for the West and winter faba beans for the East is evident.

Establishing a non-governmental research and educational organization in Canada can do many things which will make a difference in regenerating agriculture. We need your support, your solutions and your ideas if we are going to brighten the future for agriculture

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