Volume 63 Issue 4

November 2015

Soil: Our Common Ground

*This year's **NFU National Convention** theme honours the United Nations **International Year of Soils**. We will highlight the need for policies and practices to protect our soil, the foundation of our food system.*

Keynote speaker, ***Jeff Rasawehr***, will speak on ***Managing Your Soil: Restoring balance, profits and fulfillment***. A corn and soybean farmer who has changed from conventional methods to a more biological system, he will relate his experience of restoring balance to his soil using innovations such as cover crops. With these changes he has reduced his farm from 3000 acres to 900 and improved its profitability. The **Thursday evening public event starts at 7 PM**.

On **Thursday morning**, ***Peter Eggers*** will lead a 9 AM workshop, ***Soil — Agriculture's Foundation***. He will share insights, research and techniques to promote healthy soil chemistry-microbial dynamics that have dramatically improved his grain farm's productivity.

Our first panel on **Thursday afternoon** will feature three speakers on policy issues related to soil. ***Gary Martens***, retired University of Manitoba Plant Science instructor will give an overview. ***Doreen Stabinsky***, professor of Global Environmental Politics, is particularly interested in carbon sequestration policies that benefit both farmers and the climate. She will join us from Paris by Skype, where she is participating in the COP 21 Climate Change meetings. ***Blake Hall*** and his wife raise grass-finished beef and lamb, and pastured pork and eggs on their Alberta farm. He will speak about their participation in a study of different grazing systems and their role in sequestering atmospheric carbon.

Our **Saturday afternoon** panel features NFU members and their own soil-related practices. ***Alyson Chisholm*** and her partner run a mixed CSA farm in New Brunswick. ***Ken Laing*** operates a sustainable horse powered farm near St. Thomas, Ontario. They are developing organic no-till planting strategies. ***Larry Marshall's*** 3000 acre organic family farm in Saskatchewan specializes in industrial hemp. In his international travels he has learned new methods of using micro-organisms for feed additives, inoculating compost, and biological controls. ***Peter Eggers*** from the Peace River area will round out this panel, speaking on his soil amendment innovations.

There will also be presentations on supply management, soil-related water issues, prairie grain marketing and transportation, and young/new farmer research. The NFU Youth, Women's Caucus and International Program Committee will each have meetings. Resolutions will be debated, and President, 1st and 2nd Vice Presidents, Women's President, Women's Vice President, Youth President and Youth Vice President will be elected.

Everyone is welcome to attend NFU Conventions, whether you are a family farm member, associate member, visitor or media.

There is no advance registration - daily or full convention fees are payable at the door. The location is Doubletree by Hilton, 300 King Street, London, Ontario.

For more information, see: www.nfu.ca .

union farmer newsletter

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TPP tips power balance in corporations' favour

The NFU promotes food sovereignty – the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. Trade deals such as the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) would take Canada in the opposite direction. The TPP, CETA and other such agreements affect trade, but they are fundamentally about shifting economic decision-making power from national governments to multinational corporations by setting out rules that bind future governments.

TPP negotiations were finalized on October 4, 2015. Like CETA and other trade deals, this agreement was negotiated in secret. The TPP text is being withheld from public scrutiny – though corporations were involved in developing the agreement and had access to negotiators during the process. Canadian voters will not know the TPP's details until after the federal election, though parts of the text have been leaked. (See https://wikileaks.org/tpp/)

Trade deals like TPP are only superficially about trade – their fundamental purpose is to build an international framework that takes decision-making power away from national governments and gives it to the corporate sector. These deals contain ratchet mechanisms, such as Investor State Dispute Settlement (ISDS), that make it difficult, if not impossible, for countries to roll back concessions and reclaim democratic control in the future. The Canadian government would abdicate much of its jurisdiction over important areas of public policy and putting these powers into corporate hands by signing on to the TPP and other trade deals.

Which countries are in the TPP?

The TPP is an expansion of the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement (TPSEP or P4) that was signed by Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore in 2005. Since then, the USA, Australia, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Vietnam, Canada, and finally, Japan joined the talks. Canada already has trade deals with the USA and Mexico (NAFTA) as well as bilateral deals with Peru, and Chile.

How does TPP affect Agriculture?

Media coverage about the TPP and agriculture has attempted to frame it as a trade-off: suggesting there is an obvious negative impact on supply management sectors but others, such as grain, beef and pork, will benefit from reduced tariffs and increased market access. In reality, the TPP benefits global corporations at the expense of farmers' market power, regardless of commodity or country.

The TPP facilitates the concentration of the grain, oilseed and livestock industries by making national boundaries less and less economically significant. The world's biggest companies take over smaller competitors – local, regional and national enterprises – using mergers and acquisitions to grow without investing in new productive capacity. With operations in several countries, global corporations structure their value chains by situating their operations in locations with economically relevant advantages, such as low wages and weak labour laws, lax environmental standards, proximity to markets, climatic conditions, cheap transportation and subsidized energy. Trade agreements like the TPP make it easier for corporations to move goods, services, money and people between countries. They can maximize profits by locating production in low-cost areas, while importing tariff-free inputs from the lowest-cost suppliers and selling into markets where consumers have higher incomes.

Producers, such as farmers, are tied to their locations because they need land. Trade agreements put them into competition with farmers around the world, which drives down commodity prices and makes livelihoods more precarious for all. Canada's farm debt has increased faster than the value of our agriculture exports, which indicates that the drive to increase trade has not made farmers more prosperous. *(see graph on next page).*

In Canada, over 90 percent of federally inspected meat is processed by two foreign-owned companies: JBS and Cargill. Canada's grain industry is dominated by Cargill, Viterra (owned by Glencore), and Richardson International, with Bunge/SALIC entering the picture as G3 after the federal government gave it the former Canadian Wheat Board assets. Together, these companies operate in the largest TPP countries: USA, Australia, Japan, Mexico and New Zealand. It is inconceivable that they were not among the corporations advising the Canadian government – and promoting their own self-interest – in the TPP negotiations.

Gutting supply management

If Canada ratifies the TPP it will undermine the supply management system to the point of collapse. Supply management rests on three pillars: producer discipline, cost of production pricing and import controls. The TPP

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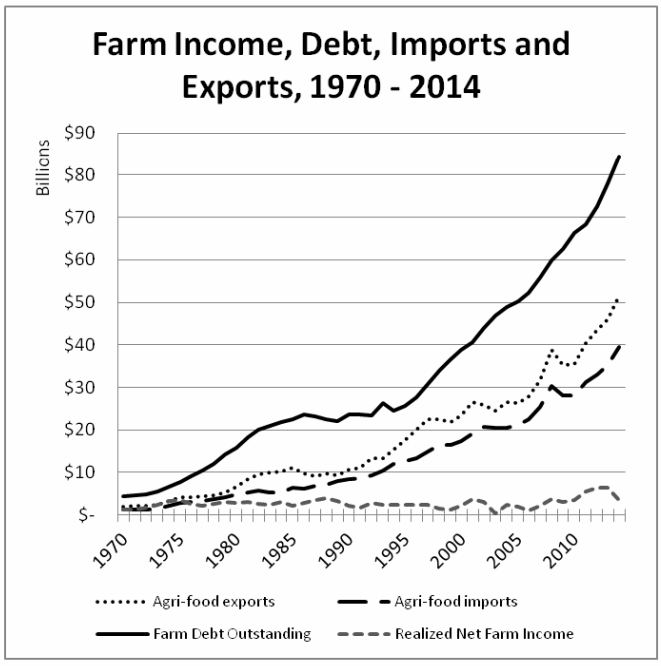

Source: Statistics Canada

effectively eliminates the third pillar over the life of the agreement and drastically undermines the cost of production pricing pillar. It is public knowledge that the TPP will give member countries tariff-free access to 3.25% of Canada's current dairy market, 2.3% for eggs, 2.1% for chicken, 2% for turkey and 1.5% for broiler hatching eggs within five years. The NFU has obtained a leaked government document that indicates Canada has agreed to provide access to a further 1% per year of each supply managed commodity's market for 13 subsequent years.

Canada has already agreed to give up 5% of the dairy market through the WTO and a further 4% through CETA. The total loss of dairy market from these agreements will be 25.25% in 18 years. Chicken, turkey and eggs, under similar formulas, will lose approximately 15% of their markets over the next 18 years. This evidence corroborates our concern that the government's promise of $1.5 billion to compensate for loss of quota value over ten years and $2.4 billion for loss of income over 15 years is meant to support an agenda to completely dismantle supply management.

Statements made by New Zealand leaders indicate that the TPP partners will seek additional concessions in future negotiations. John Wilson, Chairman of New Zealand's dairy exporter, Fonterra said: *"... there will be some useful gains for New Zealand dairy exporters in key TPP markets such as the US, Canada and Japan.* ***Greater benefits will be seen in future years as tariffs on some product lines are eliminated****."* Referring to dairy, New Zealand Trade Minister Tim Groser said: *"We started from a high level of ambition. We haven't been able to achieve that today,* ***but it's established a direction of travel.*** *This will open space for future generations of trade ministers."*

TPP imports would lead to Canadian dairy processors using imported product to concentrate processing in fewer, larger plants. This would lead to shutting down smaller plants, increasing the distance between consumers and their food, and eliminating dairy production in areas of the country, such as the Maritimes and BC, that are not served by large processing plants.

Investor State Dispute Settlement

Every trade deal Canada has signed since NAFTA contains an Investor State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) mechanism that makes it possible for corporations to sue national governments if they pass laws or regulations that reduce the company's future profitability. If TPP is ratified, recent laws such as the *Agriculture Growth Act*, that shift power away from farmers and consumers, would be locked in. Any future government that repeals or amends these harmful laws would risk being sued for billions of dollars by corporations in unaccountable trade tribunals – not in our own court system. ISDS mechanisms empower a few appointed trade lawyers to over-ride the democratic will of the Canadian people.

Other measures

The TPP has new rules requiring "State Owned Enterprises", or Crown Corporations as we call them in Canada, to operate on a solely commercial basis as if they were for-profit businesses. This has implications for the Post Office, the CBC and any government-owned entity that might compete with a private business based in a TPP country.

The TPP requires all members to adopt the UPOV '91 Plant Breeders Rights regime.

The TPP deems the country of origin for livestock to be the country of slaughter. Thus Canadian live cattle shipped to the US for slaughter would become US cattle for trade purposes. The TPP also allows meat processors to use meat from anywhere when making sausages; and for other meat products, they can use non-TPP ingredients for up to 55% of the final value of a product.

TPP members agree to work towards harmonization of food safety and animal/plant health regulations (sanitary and phytosanitary measures). This would have implications for Canada's ability to control meat inspection processes, veterinary drug approvals and drug and pesticide residue limits.

TPP or food sovereignty?

One of the cornerstones of food sovereignty is giving people democratic control when decisions are made regarding food. Negotiating trade deals behind closed doors and not making the text available to either elected representatives or citizens is not democratic. Instead of tying us to trade deals like CETA and the TPP, our government should adopt policies that are in keeping with the values and practices of food sovereignty.

Soil health: farming to feed microbes

—by Sarah Hargreaves

Healthy Soil Starts with Soil Organic Matter

Soil health is the foundation of resilient agricultural systems. An ambiguous term, my favourite definition of soil health is "*the capacity of soil to function as a vital living system to sustain biological productivity, promote environmental quality and maintain plant and animal health*".[1]

At the heart of soil health is soil organic matter (SOM), which is stabilized – or stored – in soil aggregates. SOM is important for building and maintaining soil structure, infiltration, water and nutrient holding capacity, and resistance of soil to erosion from wind and water. In essence, SOM turns "dirt" into "soil".

SOM is the heart of soil health and soil microorganisms are its soul

SOM is a mix of living organisms, fresh and actively decomposing organic materials (such as crop resides) and humus.

The formation of SOM is similar to digestion in our guts. Decomposers breakdown dead plants, animals and microbes (think *'food'*): macrofauna physically decompose organic material (think *'chewing'*) and soil bacteria and fungi chemically decompose organic material by releasing enzymes into the soil matrix (think *'digestion'*). As a result, nutrients are made available and taken up by plant roots and microbes (think *'absorption'*). The remaining mostly-decomposed organic matter is stabilized as humus in clumps called aggregates (think *'poo'*). While all types of decomposers are important, fungi and bacteria are the real powerhouses of decomposition because their digestive enzymes release nutrients into the soil, help stabilize aggregates and lead to the formation of humus.

Farming to Feed Microbes

How does what we do on the farm promote SOM formation and its related benefits? While other factors (such as soil properties, parent material, topography and climate) are important — what we "feed" microbes is our biggest influence on SOM formation. That is, what and when we plant and how we manage is how we direct soil health.

Extended crop rotations and cover crops provide a balanced diet for microbes

Links between crop rotations and soil health are becoming clearer. Decades of anecdotal evidence from farmers is now supported by studies that show extended (3+ years) crop rotations, especially those than include cover crops, are the cornerstone to agricultural soil health. A recent meta-analysis of 122 agriculture research studies found that extended rotations increase soil health indicators like total soil carbon by 3.6% (up to 8.5% with cover crops), total soil N by 5.3% (up to 12.8% with cover crops) and microbial biomass by an average 21%![2] Other studies show that the abundance of fungi also increases.[3,4] The reason for this connection is also becoming clear: crop rotations provide a range of plant inputs to feed microbes a plentiful and balanced diet.[5]

Perennial plant cover and grazing feed microbes year-round

Perennial plants and pastures with mixtures of grasses, forbs and legumes are microbes' dream come true. Microbial biomass, including the amount of fungi, is high in well-managed pastures. This is because microbe-root associations and fungal networks in the soil are not broken at harvest; fed year-round, microbes actively produce enzymes to process organic material. Even more, grazing (but not overgrazing!) stimulates root sloughing. Sloughed roots are a perfect source of food

Basic ingredients for soil health

Here are the key factors to think about when farming to feed microbes:

Diversity. Diversity begets diversity, such that plant (and animal) diversity aboveground can increase belowground microbial diversity, abundance and activity. Diverse microbial communities are more resistant to shifts in climate, like drought, and have a better chance of thriving in extreme or novel environmental conditions.[5,13]

Year-round food. Our animals need food year–round and so do our microbes! Given food, some microbes remain active all year. Active microbes decompose organic material, which forms humus and stabilizes aggregates.

Balanced diet. Microbes need a balance carbon sources and nutrients in order to multiply and actively produce the enzymes that decompose organic material.

Fungi. Fungi need carbon and interaction with roots to thrive. Fungal-dominated communities are associated with enhancement of SOM and aggregation and increased nitrogen retention in soils.[9,14]

There is no single recipe for soil health; the greatest benefit is usually seen when multiple soil health-promoting practices are used.

because they contain a balance of easy and less accessible sugars and nutrients.[6,7]

The importance of perennials to microbes is also why cover crops are so beneficial – farmers use annual plants to mimic year-round interactions between plants and microbes.

Carbon-containing fertilizers provide a balanced diet for microbes

A balanced diet for microbes is key to whether fertilizer application enhances or depletes soil health. While fertilizers are applied to soils to feed crops, they also feed microbes. Organic fertilizers, such as manure and compost, contain nutrients (N, P, K and etc.) balanced with carbon. Amending soil with carbon-containing fertilizers helps grow large and active microbial communities and, in turn, leads to the formation of humus and stability of aggregates.[8]

In contrast, inorganic fertilizers, such as anhydrous ammonia and urea, are "unbalanced" because they have no carbon complement. Amending soil solely with inorganic fertilizers fosters a predominance of "addicted" bacteria reliant on inorganic sources of nutrients. This type of community is detrimental to soil health because the community is smaller and less active; microbes rapidly consume nutrients and then lay dormant waiting for the next volley of inorganic inputs.[9]

No-till and no-spray minimize disturbance to microbes

Less soil habitat disturbance lets microbes can better enhance soil health. Tillage disrupts soil structure and fungal networks, and over-stimulates microbes to quickly burn through food sources. No-tillage systems generally have greater SOM, greater microbial biomass and higher ratios of fungi to bacteria. The specific effect of tillage, however, depends on residue removal rates and placement and soil moisture.[10] Spraying chemicals can also interfere with microbial life. For example, glyphosate, a chelator, binds essential minerals in the soil thereby making them unavailable for microbial use and interfering with important symbiotic relationships like nitrogen fixation and mycorrhizal root colonization.[11,12]

Measuring soil health

The health of soil depends on a number of factors so there is no one-way to measure it. Typically, soil health is estimated from a few or many different measurements.

Total soil carbon is a way to estimate soil organic matter.

Aggregate stability measures the resistance of soil aggregates to disruption from outside forces such as water.

Microbial biomass measures the amount of carbon (and nitrogen) stored in microbial cells.

Phospholipid fatty acid (PLFA) analysis measures the ratio of fungi to bacteria.

Mineralization assays measure microbial activity.

Enzyme assays specifically measure activity associated microbial digestion/decomposition.

Combination tests, such as the Haney test, measures soil health as a sum of tests about the soil, microbial community and microbial activity.

Within farms and between farms, soils are different. This heterogeneity makes it hard to interpret soil health indicators from a single measurement. To get a reliable picture of soil health it is best to take multiple measurements.

Depending on your specific question, multiple measurements might be best taken (1) over time – like after you change management practices or crop rotation, (2) within a single farm – to compare current practices or rotations, or (3) across farms – to compare a new practice on your farm to other practices in the same general area.

Sarah Hargreaves, PhD *is a soil microbial ecologist and farms pastured livestock with her family on their farm, Three Ridges Ecological Farm, in Elgin County, Ontario.*

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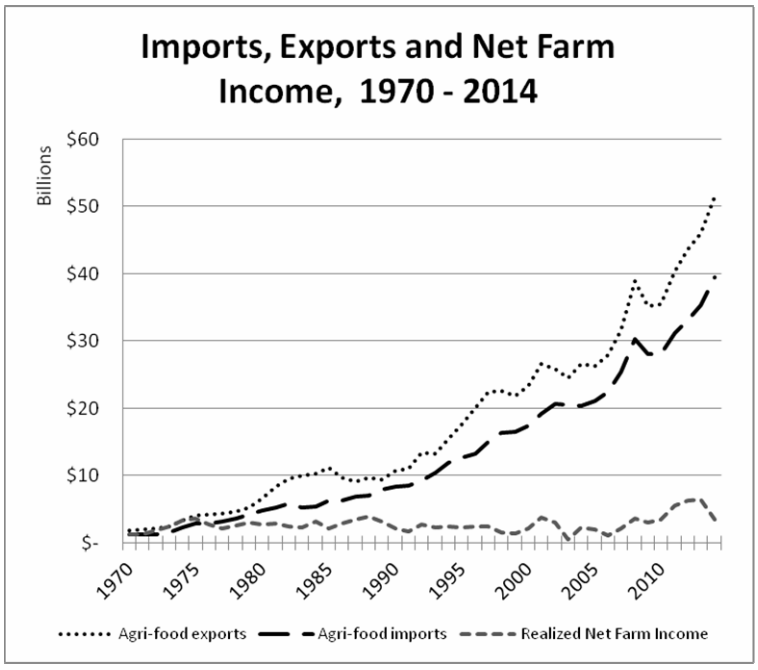
A statistical snapshot of Canada's agriculture economy



Source: Statistics Canada

Realized net farm income = what farmers take home after paying the cost of production.

Agri-food exports = the dollar value of agriculture and food products exported from Canada to other countries.

Agri-food imports = the value of agriculture and food products imported into Canada from other countries.

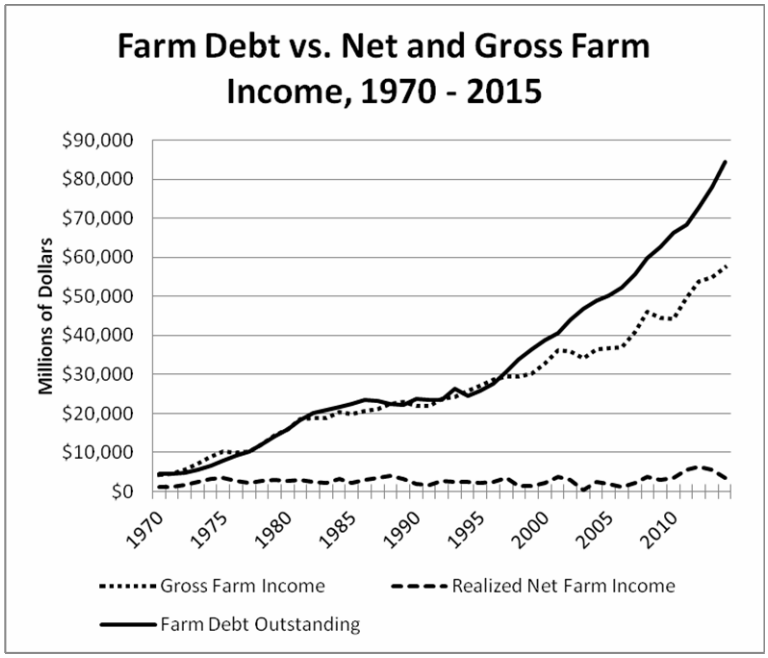
Canada's agriculture economy has become focused on trade. The value of both exports and imports have increased by more than five times since 1988 when the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement was signed, but the total realized net farm income of farmers has actually dropped during this same time period. Today's net farm income is shared by fewer farmers. The current trade-oriented agriculture policies are not the answer to Canada's farm income crisis.

Gross farm income = the total value of farm products sold by farmers.

Realized net farm income = what farmers take home after paying the cost of production.

Farm Debt Outstanding = the total amount of debt that farmers have taken on, including investment in land and equipment as well as operating loans.

Since 1970 realized net farm income in Canada has remained virtually unchanged, while the value of farm products has steadily increased. The cost of production has risen dramatically, and thus farmers have taken on more and more debt in order to stay in business. Farm debt is increasing faster than gross farm income. Nearly all of the gain in value of farm products has been paid out to input suppliers while farmers are taking on more risk and paying out more in interest. Increasing total farm debt indicates a systemic problem, not individual management issues.



Source: Statistics Canada

Seed saving under the amended Plant Breeders Rights Act

On February 27, 2015 Bill C-18's amendments to Canada's *Plant Breeders Rights Act* went into effect.
How does this affect farmers who save seed?

Innovation message replaced with intimidation tactics

Soon after Bill C-18 became law, the seed industry lobby group, the Canadian Seed Trade Association (CSTA), launched a new website called PBRfacts.ca. The site is apparently designed not only to inform, but also to intimidate farmers into buying seed – whether UPOV '91 protected or not – from CSTA members to create a paper trail of receipts as evidence they have paid applicable royalties. Intimidating language is particularly apparent in the CSTA's advice to seed cleaners and grain buyers. The CSTA raises the spectre of wide-ranging, expensive lawsuits if a company can prove Plant Breeders Rights (PBR) infringement. It advises these businesses to transfer liability to farmers by demanding proof of variety and royalty payment before providing service or taking deliveries. This kind of aggressive, self-serving behaviour by the seed companies is not surprising, even though farmers were told they would benefit from innovation and greater choice before Bill C-18 was passed.

It is important for farmers and independent seed cleaners to know their rights regarding seed saving. Replacing the age-old practice of seed saving with annual seed purchases from global corporations will create dependency and transfer wealth to the seed companies. Scaring farmers into buying new seed every year would be very lucrative for seed companies, and much less expensive than actually carrying out court actions.

Old varieties grandfathered

Bill C-18's changes apply only to new varieties granted PBRs after the law was changed. All varieties that were available before February 27, 2015 remain under the old law. If you are using the same variety you used last year, the rules for your seed have not changed.

Varieties in the public domain

Our old, UPOV '78-compliant law grants PBRs on seed varieties for 18 years unless the breeder gives up the rights sooner. If you use older varieties, your seed may already be in the public domain because its PBRs have expired. Heritage varieties have always been in the public domain. When seed is in the public domain there are no restrictions on saving and replanting seed. You can also legally buy, sell and exchange seed from public domain varieties.

Non-commercial use

PBRs do not apply to seed when it is used for private and personal use. You don't need to worry about PBRs if you are saving seed for your backyard garden or your own food supply regardless of variety.

New varieties

Only varieties granted rights after February 27, 2015 are affected by the new law. If you bought new seed this year, it might be a new variety that is covered by UPOV '91. Check to see if it has the new PBR logo on the label. New varieties are listed in the quarterly *Plant Varieties Journal* on the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) website (see https://tinyurl.com/ph7nzlq). The CFIA and CSTA have also set up a searchable database on the CSTA website (see https://tinyurl.com/ph4thhs) where you can look up the PBR status of varieties. You can still save seed covered by UPOV '91 and re-use it on your own farm, but buyers and seed cleaners may require proof that royalties were paid when the original seed was purchased.

Contracts

Some older varieties are sold under a commercial contract between the farmer and the seed company that contains a clause that restricts saving seed. Identity Preserved contracts usually require the entire crop to be sold back to the company or a designated buyer. Farmers who buy midge tolerant wheat seed are limited to saving one generation of seed in order to prevent the insects from evolving tolerance to the midge-resistance trait. These restrictions on seed saving are due to the contracts, not the new PBR law.

Genetically modified seed

Ever since the first genetically modified crops (GMOs) were introduced, GMO varieties have been covered by patents. Patents are not the same as PBRs.

(continued on page 8…)

Publication Agreement No. 40063391
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(Seed saving…, from page 7)

Patents only apply to inventions – not to complex organisms such as whole plants. Biotech companies patent invented gene sequences, but because the gene sequences are integrated into the seed, these patents also give the company exclusive rights over the seed.

They generally prohibit anyone from using the GMO seed unless they buy it directly from the company or a licensee. Thus, if a farmer saves seed from a GMO crop to plant next year, the farmer would be violating the company's patent rights, and could be sued . UPOV '91 allows GMO seed to be covered by both Patent Rights and Plant Breeders Rights, but that doesn't change the situation on the ground: you can't legally save GMO seed without the company's permission.

Regulations

The amended PBR law includes new powers that enable the federal government to bring in regulations to restrict saving and re-using seed from new varieties. So far, this has not happened. The NFU will keep an eye on any proposals for such regulatory changes and make sure MPs hear our concerns loud and clear.

NFU Membership Development Campaign Underway

—Aric McBay, NFU National Membership Development Trainer

National Farmers Union
Union Nationale des Fermiers

We're glad to report that the NFU has received a small grant to help with membership development nationally. We're currently gathering input from a variety of NFU members about how people in different regions appeal to new members, retain existing members, and keep their communities strong and vital.

We've already received some very enthusiastic and useful ideas from across the country. If you haven't heard from us directly but you want to give input, please don't hesitate to contact me at membership@nfu.ca. (If you don't use email, please contact me via the National Office).

This first stage of the project will produce a membership development booklet to share ideas and skills for recruiting locally. This will be accompanied by a workbook that you can use by yourself or with a local group. We want to provide resources that will strengthen capacity at the grassroots level.

These resources will be unveiled at a workshop taking place at the National Convention. **This workshop will be for members who are willing to facilitate kitchen table meetings when they go back home.** It will be an excellent opportunity to gain new skills, practice some outreach role plays, share ideas and challenges, and meet other people who care about increasing our membership. **IF YOU WISH TO ATTEND THIS WORKSHOP, PLEASE CONTACT ARIC AT membership@nfu.ca TO PRE-REGISTER.**

If you plan to attend the National Convention, I hope that you will join us at the workshop, or come and talk with me at another time to share some of your thoughts and experience. I'm very excited about the opportunities we have to revitalize our union's growth.

The membership development booklet and other resources should be generally available in December, 2015.

If you have questions, ideas about growing NFU membership, or if you want to answer a short survey on the topic, you can reach me (Aric) at membership@nfu.ca .