

The Beingessner Award for Excellence in Writing

The National Farmers Union (NFU) would like to congratulate Alana Krug-MacLeod (age 16) of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, who was the winner of the Beingessner Award for Excellence in Writing.

The Beingessner Award is part of the NFU Youth's Campaign for New Farmers, and is given to the authors (age 21 years and under) of the best 500-1000 word essay on agriculture and food issues in Canada. There are two age categories – 15 and under, and ages 16 to 21. The winner from each age category is awarded a prize of \$500. The theme of this year's essay was "Co-ops: An Exercise in Democracy".

The Beingessner Award is named after Paul Beingessner of Truax, Saskatchewan, who passed away in the spring of 2009 in a tragic farm accident. Paul was born on April 26, 1954, and returned to the family farm after obtaining his BA (Hon) in Psychology in 1976 and working with youth in Regina for a few years. Described as the "god-father of modern shortline railways" by former NFU President Stewart Wells, Paul was instrumental in the founding of Saskatchewan's first shortline railway, Southern Rails Co-operative, and served as general manager from 1991 to 1997. When he left Southern Rails, he stayed on as a board member, and worked with the Ministry of Highways Short Line Advisory Unit supporting other efforts of farmers to start shortline railways. Since 1991, Paul wrote a weekly column on farming and transportation issues with a social justice focus featured in papers across Western Canada. After leaving the government in 1999, his expertise on transportation issues resulted in consulting work across Western Canada and the United States. Beingessner also served as a Saskatchewan Wheat Pool Delegate from 1996 to 1998, and was an ardent supporter of the CWB and ran for the position of director in 2008.

Getting to the Roots: Reconnecting Consumers and Farmers

—by Alana Krug-MacLeod, Age 16, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

My summer ended with a journey to a permaculture convergence near Rocky Mountain House, Alberta. There I was introduced to some innovative approaches to agriculture and to the people who do it. I had already visited a food forest and permaculture garden at Craik Ecovillage; overnighted in rural Saskatchewan at a permaculture farm complete with livestock; and participated in a backyard permablitz in Saskatoon. These choices were motivated by my intensifying awareness that the food we eat and the way it is grown is critical not just to people but also to the welfare of our environment.

Governments can play a role in awakening citizens to this critical awareness about the importance of food related issues, and doing so would be the best possible way to help future farmers succeed. Good policy at all three levels of government would be necessary to allow this food-awareness to take place.

Connecting consumers to farmers is essential for building community awareness about the issues farmers face, and one way to do that would be to support local growers. By buying food from farmers in their region, consumers build relationships with

producers, learn about how their food is produced, and keep money circulating in the local community. This approach reduces the transportation miles of food items, helping the environment. To achieve this goal, local government could support outlets such as farmers' markets by building infrastructure. Tax money invested would return to the community as farmers spend money locally, making this a financially viable option. Such approaches are only one step towards consumers purchasing locally grown farm products, as only a small proportion of farm goods could actually be sold in such ways. Mechanisms for fostering local food consumption would have to be developed so that producers working within a small radius of any given community would satisfy the majority of food needs.

Towns, cities and municipal governments could support an even more local approach to food production. Rather than lead to competition with local farmers, doing so would actually help support farmers because once people got their hands dirty growing food they would see how much work is involved, better understand some of the costs and difficulties faced by farmers, and value farmers more

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highly. Reconnecting people with the source of their nourishment and enabling them to prepare meals with fresh, unprocessed foods would benefit farmers and consumers rather than food processors and transporters - allowing a higher percentage of food costs to be returned to farmers. It would also lower the environmental footprint of food consumers, benefitting the environment. Local governments could facilitate this change by establishing by-laws that permitted vacant lots to be used for food production and by approving legislation allowing some animal production in back yards. Local governments could continue to support community gardens, and to seek out ineffectively used green spaces, designating them for food production. In addition, they could plant fruit and nut-bearing trees and shrubs in public areas - parks, boulevards, and along streets. Intensifying food production in cities and towns would raise consumer awareness of local foods, and build support for local farmers.

The provincial government could encourage local food consumption in two main areas of its jurisdiction - education and health. Use of locally-produced, nutritious foods would lower medical expenses for society by improving the health of the general population. Establishing contracts with local farmers to supply the food used in medical facilities would benefit farmers, patients, and tax-payers. Likewise, since provincial governments govern education, every province could establish integrated lunch programs in schools. These programs would involve growing food on school grounds, or purchasing fresh food from local farmers. Learning to produce food; getting physical exercise from productive and meaningful labour; and practicing meal preparation with produce grown locally would prepare students to value farming at a young age. Through the education and health care systems, provincial governments could play a significant role in ensuring that farming would be viable for future generations.

In order for the legislation and food-related initiatives at more local levels of government to be effective, some major policy decisions at the federal level would have to be re-examined. For decades, emphasis has been on establishing free trade agreements and on building trade deals with countries. However, some kinds of protectionism would need to be reasserted if Canada is to regain control over its food production and consumption policies. The loss of farmer owned selling monopolies that can compete with the few powerful multinational corporations that monopolize the markets restricts farming for future generations. New alternatives are needed, ones that give farmers collective control over where their products are sold and for how much. If farmers are to stay on the land and earn a viable income, they will have to be able to pass land down from generation to generation. Ensuring that this is not financially onerous is critical. Programs such as land banks, while controversial, allow new farmers to enter into food production without the financial risk required to purchase their own land. Establishing land trusts that ensure agricultural land remains available for food production is another mechanism that would ensure success for future generations of farmers. Any approach that counters the tendency to larger farm sizes and foreign and absentee land ownership is a means to support farmers directly. More farms and smaller farms owned by local people would build strong communities and a collective voice for farmers. These are essential actions that need to be taken at the federal level to support farmers.

All levels of government have a role to play in supporting the next generation of farmers and a responsibility to improve our understanding of the value and importance of managing our country's food supply. Building a culture that values food and agriculture and in which citizens know and appreciate the true cost of growing healthy nutritious food locally would lead to a world where farming is valued and farmers earn viable incomes.

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