

Knowledge Transfer

Farmers and agronomists are looking for better ways to move valid information from researchers to the field, and between farmers themselves.

On one level, you could say that crop production runs on soil, water, seed and other inputs. In some ways, however, the crucial input that makes the whole thing tick is information.

Ryan Schoorlemmer attended the ACIDF Cropping Initiatives Issues/Solutions Session held in Spirit River. He made the case that the industry needs to get better at knowledge transfer. He's particularly concerned that mechanisms for communication *between* Alberta producers are lacking.

“If you have a question or an idea on how something could work better – whether it's farm production or management decision-making – there's a good chance someone in a different area has worked on it,” says Schoorlemmer, who farms near Spirit River, while working as a consulting agronomist and seed company representative. “If we can get that information where it needs to go, we can avoid reinventing the wheel.”

Farming and consulting in the less-populated Peace River region, Schoorlemmer believes producers in the area are at a disadvantage in terms of peer-to-peer knowledge transfer. Social media tools like Twitter can help, but many producers aren't on them.

To Schoorlemmer, when new information is hard to get, producers can fall into the trap of doing what's worked well in the past – not what could work even better in the future. There could be a meaningful agronomic advance somewhere, but without effective knowledge transfer, others may not be able to take advantage of it.

“In many ways here in the Peace, we're like an island separated from the rest of the province,” he says. “Farmers in this area tend to stay within their group and often don't go outside. So we have to do a better job at getting new information out there.”

Wanted: better research-extension fulfillment

As Rick Taillieu sees it, there's a wealth of valuable research information available that growers need and want. The trouble is, they can't get their hands on it.

“Generally speaking, we spend lots of money on research, but we do a poor job of knowledge transfer,” says Taillieu, Grower Relations and Extension Coordinator with the Alberta Canola Producers Commission.

At one time, a network of provincial extension specialists connected farmers with agronomic and research information. Whose job is it now? For his part, Taillieu believes the research community needs to step up to the plate. While extension is one element of many funders' requirements, he maintains that delivery on this requirement is often insufficient to the task.

Research organizations' websites may have great information, but Taillieu sees three problems here. One, finding the right information on a given website can be difficult. Two, some organizations charge a fee to download a full research report. Three, how many websites do farmers have time to hunt through, in order to find what they need?

Taillieu sees merit in considering a general research portal online, or research information hub, where all research information relevant to Alberta can be aggregated and organized. Regardless of the vehicle chosen, he believes that knowledge transfer demands more attention and commitment all around. This would help translate research knowledge into farming practices.

Knowledge Transfer:

Issues identified by stakeholders

- strategic knowledge dissemination in every research project
- education framework for point-of-sale staff
- protocol and training for on-farm research (training agrologists)
- creating dialogue throughout the research process
- industry-wide, collaborative team approach on knowledge transfer
- creating an information hub

Knowledge Transfer:

Action items: what should be researched first

- strategic knowledge dissemination in every research project
- create an information hub, such as a searchable Alberta crop 'wiki'
- develop protocols for on-farm applied research projects and support growers in conducting them
- develop new and innovative approaches to getting knowledge published and into the hands of growers, agronomists and product distributors
- develop and make available new and much-needed decision-making tools