

Sharing secrets...

Three Canadian dairy farmers bound for Cuba!

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On a dark December night, two Canadian dairy farmers and an economist board planes in two different cities and fly to Toronto, where the fourth in their party - another dairy farmer - awaits. Together, they slip thru customs and board a plane to Havana. Their cargo? Secrets. Canadian secrets that the Cubans need. Badly.

The three farmers and the economist are the latest agents in a pipeline of secrets that stretches back into the 1960's – when Castro first turned to Canada.

As the cabin lights dim and the plane taxis for take off, the four Team members sit silent, immersed in thoughts of what the next two weeks will bring, and their part in it. Arriving in late afternoon, they deplane into the tropical heat of Havana and are whisked off by functionaries to a pre-Revolutionary colonial mansion tucked away in Havana's shady Vedado District where they will spend the next 14 nights.

A few days of meetings and the exchange is imminent. Mist rises from the fields against a crimson sunrise as they set out across the countryside to a cooperative on the Havana-Matanzas border.

For several days, they watch and shadow their Cuban counterparts, then spring it on them. Together, a plan is hatched. In March, the information transfer will begin.

A LONG HISTORY OF SHARING

The secrets these farmers are trading in? Skills. Dairy and herd management skills honed to perfection by Canada's farmers and shared with the Cubans through the Project Enhancing Sustainable Dairy Production Capacity in Cuba. CIDA-supported, this Environment and Sustainable Development NGO Project twins Canadian dairy and herd management skills with a very skookum Cuban rotational grazing system to increase milk production at the Agricultural Production Cooperative 26 July.

Cuba's dairy sector was literally founded on Canadian genetics. In the mid 1960's, Castro sent a team to Canada to purchase dairy cattle. Our Holsteins adapted to Cuba's slightly different conditions (climate, for one) and did well. But when the Soviet Union collapsed, so did Cuba's sugar economy. Overnight, they lost almost 70% of their food supply, all their foreign currency, and most farm inputs.

Embargoed by the US, Cuba's economy was thrown into crisis. Among other things, imported feed grains were a thing of the past. Canadian Holsteins turned up their noses at low protein diets and went on strike. The Cuban crossed their Holstein's with a Brahma breed (Cebu) and got a dual-purpose animal that did two things poorly, but didn't starve.

Meanwhile, back in the lab, Cuban scientists were plotting. What if you took a large field and separated it into long, skinny pastures 10-15 feet in width? Using trellises planted with high protein, irrigated legumes, nestled under page wire tents? Cows munch the grass, prune the legumes back to the page wire, then get moved one aisle over. Then one aisle over from that. Then one aisle over from that. By the time they rotate back to the first aisle, the grass and legumes are at peak nutrient value (14-17 days from emergence). Picture a series of long, skinny "Chia Worms" snaking the length of the field, dividing it into ribbon pastures.

Problem was, though Los Pedestales increased milk production by 58% in trials using a purebred Holstein herd, it was insufficient to justify the cost of erecting the system, so the Cubans moved on, replacing trellises with legumous trees (which carry the bonus of a reforestation credit). Close but no cigar.

"Pretty damn clever" said our dairy farmers when they visited the trials of Los Pedestales in Holguin province in 2000. "This system provides more than enough protein. If these guys learned better animal and dairy management skills, they'd get way more production, even from these animals..."

AND SO IT CAME TO BE...

And so it came to be, some three years later, that Vancouver-based International Centre for Sustainable Cities (www.icsc.ca) agreed to be our Canadian partner, CIDA backed our Proposal, and we are on our way!

The first visit is a planning session. Our second (one month) visit in March will tell the tale. If this demonstration project works (increases milk production such that the system pays for itself), we will document it all in a training video and extension out the work to at least two other provinces (Camaguey and Holguin). Improved genetics are next.

The three dairy farmers participating in the Project are Lorne Hansen, Harrison Mills, BC, Bruce Beattie, Sundre, Alberta and Jim Millson, Enniskillen, Ontario, all of whom have come with me to Cuba in the past through the Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project. The aim of which is cooperative transfer of capacity for the empowerment of farmers and their communities.

The seedbed of it all is farmer-to-farmer exchange. Join us this winter on one of three Farmer Tours to Cuba and become part of something wonderful.

As a final note, I am presently raising the \$25,000 Canadian contribution to this Project. If you can help, please do! Charitable tax receipts provided. For more information 604-947-2983, holm@farmertofarmer.ca, www.theholmteam.ca.

Watch for an update on this Project in the next issue of Holstein News.

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Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.
604-947-2893
www.theholmteam.ca
holm@farmertofarmer.ca