Building a Better Tractor

Part II of II

By Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

vir-tu-al: adj 1: being actually such in almost every respect; 2: being such in essence or effect though not in actual fact; 3. simulated; performing the functions of something that isn't really there.

Those of us with computers deal with virtual reality all the time. Morning coffee in hand, we pad into home offices and begin virtual conversations with virtually everyone. Attend virtual forums. Shop at virtual bookstores. Scan virtual bulletin boards. Place bids in virtual auctions. Through e-mail "list-serves", participate as members of (worldwide) virtual communities bordered by interest, not geography.

For farmers, reality is hardly ever virtual. Unless you count the jibe about "having to be virtually insane" to farm these days. Virtually insane and half in love with the idea of coaxing product from the land is more

like it. The satisfaction that comes from watching a crop ripen in the sun. The feeling of smugness (fleeting - you've been here before!) at having won this year's wager with both Mother Nature and City Council.

Good weather and good water, in the presence of good pruning, good varieties and good pickers, should equal a good crop. Keep the tractor

humming and the tool pool in good repair, and with some cooperation from the weather, this year might just pay the bills; maybe even allow a little family getaway in winter when a tractor-weary body needs pampering...

From rootstock to farm gate, controlling, secondguessing and mitigating risk (knowing into which pocket you stuffed "Plan B"!) is what farmers "do".

But as every tree fruit and grape grower knows, hauling a great crop to the farm-gate is only part of the story. From there on in, it is the market chain that pulls the product forward to the final consumer. And therein lies the rub. Many players. No control, Fluctuations in world prices; world supply. Retail concentration and margin grabs. The unpredictable politics of interna-

tional trade (agreed-upon trading rules ignored by Washington; to wit, BSE). And, let's face it, incompetence at times from our own industry leaders (again, to wit, BSE) and our own governments (again, to wit, BSE).

What is needed is a better post farm-gate tractor - one that does the bidding of farmers rather than the other way around, one that hauls crops out and profits back.

Luckily, some hot new designs are currently on the drawing boards.

Consider, for example, the spiffy new Trade Wheel being discussed by the Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project.

Tourism is the fastest growing sector of Cuba's economy and has replaced sugar as the economic engine of development. Many of the products consumed by hotel guests (fine cheeses, wines, fruits, better cuts of meat, poultry) and imported for the Cuban population (ground beef, poultry, grains) are paid for with scarce foreign dollars badly needed by other sectors of Cuba's economy. (Although sourced

globally, an increasing share of Cuba's food imports comes from the U.S. Apparently, in Bush's White House, the political currency of America's farm lobby and Miami's Cuban-American community trades at par; a year ago, we munched Washington State apples in a 5 star hotel room in Varadero while anti-Castro

CANADIAN EXPORTS OF FOOD PRODUCTS TO CUBA, 1999 - 2003

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rhetoric spewed forth from CNN.)

Beyond cigars, rum and sugar, Cuba produces many other products of interest to Canada: tropical fruits and juice concentrates, coffee beans, medicinal and culinary herbs and bulk honey to name a few.

What if we were to experiment with a new kind of farmer-led trade model based on cooperation? Anyone remember "Green Stamps"? If not,

Anyone remember "Green Stamps"? If not, everyone is familiar with their present-day form, airline points. Buy goods and earn points that you can exchange for other goods. Only in this case, it would be "sell goods, and earn points that you can exchange for goods you want to buy."

Sounds complex? Actually, it's roll-off-a-log easy. Points earned by Cuba for products exported to Canada would be redeemed for Canadian products exported to Cuba. Transactions would happen inside a "black box" (virtual brokerage) where buyers and sellers are autonomous and trades happen independently, coordinated to oversee sourcing, shipment, quality and brokerage and make sure things don't get out of synch (e.g. too much product value flowing one way or another).

But it's the physics of the model that make my Agrologist/economist's heart go pitty-pat. A selfsustaining and sustainable trade mechanism that could benefit farmers in both countries, out-compete large, agribusiness players and - once proven in Cuba - offer farmers in other hard-currency strapped countries a brand-new model for ethical and equitable trade in farm commodities.

If current discussions with Cuba show promise, the next step would be a small-scale trial. Take a short list of low risk, high-valued Cuban and Canadian products. Approach some processors and retailers in Canada to play the game. Give the wheel a spin. Observe what happens.

Why not start in the Okanagan? Why not swap peaches for papayas? Apples for avocados? Fresh cherries for tiny, sweet bananas? Fine wines and specialty cheeses for 50-gallon drums of fresh tropical (orange, grapefruit, mango, guava and papaya) juice

Retail branding the products in Canada as "Green Stamped" (the product of a cooperative and ethical trade mechanism) would add value by capitalizing on consumer support for ethics and sustainability. Careful planning combined with the current Canadian passion for anything Cuban should ensure products fly off the shelves.

If the trial is successful? Then the black box goes regional. Then provincial. Then national. Adds bells and whistles like provisional certification for selected Cuban products under Canadian organic standards, pumping up the volume by adding organic products from both countries to the Trade Wheel and returning increased value-added to farmers and empowerment to farm communities.

When you are standing in your orchard or vineyard this August looking over the crop, a mixture of pride and anxiety gnawing at your guts (knowing it's all worth it, but wondering if you can afford it!), think about initiating this little trade wheel trial in the Okanagan. A robust little competitive creature run by professionals not farmers (you have better things to do with your time) that may well offer new markets and new trade options.

When the 27 Cuban farmers and scientists came to British Columbia in 1999, they spent a very memorable week in the Okanagan-Similkameen-Enderby area. The roots of cooperation are already well-laid. Why not the Okanagan indeed?

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