Wendy Holm

Ontario dairy farmers helping in Cuba



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Picture this: 30 hectares of rotational pastures fanning out like rays of the sun from a central milking parlour. Atop the parlour, solar panels to charge the electric fence that creates the micro-pastures. In the inner circle separating the parlour and the pastures is shade and water for 50 dairy cows.

In the lower quadrant of the circle, the electric fence is replaced by 1.5 metre high hedges of legumes nestled under a tent of page wire, creating a 5 star dining room for fresh cows in their first 130 days of lactation.

Adjacent to this is a calf nursery replete with hutches and pastures.

Sitting atop a gentle rise to the west is a simple greenhouse structure with open sides containing large blue vats of aquatic plants. Behind is a concrete holding tank, in front two large, clay-lined lagoons. Sewage from nearby urban residents is pumped into the holding tank where it is aerated and mechanically broken down before being filtered through the battery of aquatic plants at a rate of 7-10 litres per second. After processing, the nutrient-rich effluent is stored in the lagoons until needed to gravity irrigate the dairy circle's highly productive grasses and legumes.

Float valves give the cows fresh water on demand, gravity fed from a reservoir above the circle.

Flanking that is an area for the production of carbohydrate and protein crops — i.e. corn, sorghum, sunflowers, soy — also irrigated with treated effluent.

Nearby, nitrogen-restoring Neem trees provide shade to a bull pasture and feedlot.

The site of the project is the peri-

urban agriculture zone surrounding the city of Bayamo, in Cuba's drought-prone province of Granma. The date is May 17, 2010 — three years from project start.

By extracting and processing raw sewage before it enters the river, this project will also reduce pollution, improve water quality, create urban green space along what is now an open sewage canal, and reduce Bayamo's ecological footprint by the active community recycling of both nutrients and water.

Affectionately dubbed "shit to milk" by the Canadian members of the project team, the Bayamo model is the peri-urban counterpart to our soon-to-be-completed rural pilot that has already seen a tripling of production at a co-operative in Havana province.

Supported by the Canadian
International Development Agency
and Vancouver-based NGO
Sustainable Cities, the objective is to
create an environmentally sustainable
model that will allow Cuba to
become self-sufficient in dairy
production.

Prior to the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Cuba produced all the milk needed by its population. Today, Cuba imports over \$70 million a year in milk powder and dairy equivalents to meet the nutritional needs of her people. Cuba is also reliant on imports of corn gluten from the U.S. — a byproduct of the ethanol industry — to supplement the diet of their dairy cows.

The success of the project is unquestionably its farmer-to-farmer roots; without the initial leadership of Canadian dairy farmer volunteers Bruce Beattie (Alberta), Lorne Hansen (BC) and Jim Millson (Ontario) and the active ongoing involvement of Jim, his wife Gladys, daughter Morgan and soon-to-be son-in-law/rural electrician Darryl Donneral, this work could never have been contemplated.

Farmers, by their nature, are builders of capacity. This international project of cooperation is a fine demonstration of how a few dedicated people can, indeed, make a difference. And the enduring relationships that have developed between the Canadian and Cuban farmers are, in a word, priceless.

As a Canadian agrologist, it is a truly beautiful experience to have the opportunity to lead this work.

Visit www.farmertofarmer.ca/ esdpcc.html to see how you can help move this forward. Charitible tax receipts issued for all contributions.◊

People and Products

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Ken and Sally Palen and family, owners of Kenpal Farm Products Inc. in Centralia, Ontario have recently purchased the business and assets of International Stock Food Company Limited (ISF), Cambridge, Ontario.

"We're very excited about this transaction," says Ken Palen. "Kenpal will gain a strong national distribution network of ISF agents, and those agents will have access to Kenpal's team of nutritional experts and technical advisors.

"We're confident that both companies'customers will benefit in today's highly competitive food production market," he adds.

ISF products will be manufactured at Kenpal's HACCP-certified, fully bar-coded facilities.

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