

What goes around comes around.

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While bumping down the country roads of Cuba, palm trees silhouetting against a pre-dawn sky, three Canadian dairy farmers and I discuss the December 14th news release that arrived by email the night before: *Cuba Opens to Canadian Beef, Nears Agreement on Live Cattle.*

By fully re-opening its border to all cuts of Canadian beef (bone in, bone out, from cattle of any age) and fast tracking approvals for live cattle imports, Cuba became the first country in the world to actually honour OIE Guidelines (international animal health rules) since tiny Macau did so in March 2004.

Regardless of what happens in Washington (more promises last week; Congress can still delay; farmers will believe it when they see it), Cuba's early and solid support for our beef sector was and should remain significant, not only for its diversification and export value but perhaps most importantly, because of what it represents. What goes around comes around, and at this time of year, that's a good thing to remember.

As we headed into the sunrise that morning to observe a 5 am milking at the Cuban Agricultural Production Cooperative with whom we would work for the next year, the news felt good. Just as we were taking our first steps to assist Cuban farmers, Cuba was there to give Canadian farmers a leg-up.

The four of us, dairy farmers Bruce Beattie (Alberta), Lorne Hansen (British Columbia) Jim Millson (Ontario) and I, were there to begin the project Enhancing Sustainable Dairy Production Capacity in Cuba, supported by the Canadian International Development Agency. This project grew out of the Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project, my seven-year-old affair of the professional heart.

Why Cuba? Because Cuba is a world leader in organic agriculture. Because our farmers have skills in animal production systems, processing, packaging, labeling and marketing. Because together, we have more answers than we have apart.

To date, 300 farm men and women from across Canada have traveled with me to Cuba in 15 delegations. Beattie, Hansen and Millson were among them and are now back, in a cooperative, capacity building framework, to share with Cuban farmers the animal husbandry skills that rank our dairy farmers among the best in the world.

After all, we have a history. After the Cuban Revolution, when Fidel Castro was looking for the genetics upon which to build Cuba's dairy sector, he turned to Canada. To this day, the bloodlines of Holstein bulls and heifers purchased from Canada in the 70's dominate Cuba's national herd.

But in the early 1990's, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's economy was thrown into chaos.

Overnight, farm inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, farm machinery, petroleum and feed grains disappeared.

In response, Cuba crossed their highly bred Holsteins with more down-to-earth Cebu to produce Siboney, an "easy keeper" dual-purpose animal that could survive on a low-protein, low energy diet.

Next, Cuba turned to its scientists, and Los Pedestales was born. It is an irrigated grass-legume rotational grazing system that divides a pasture into long skinny aisles bordered by 5 foot high trellises of legumes under page wire. Trials resulted in a 60 percent increase in milk production in a purebred Holstein herd.

Unfortunately, for other reasons, milk production remained low and Los Pedestales was considered too costly to implement. The Cubans moved on, replacing trellises with legumous trees which carry the bonus of a reforestation credit.

Ah, the benefit of international eyes. When our farmers first saw Los Pedestales in 2000, they were some impressed.

“This system provides more than enough protein,” they told me. “What these guys need is better herd management skills.”

And so – after three years of development work— this small but important project was born.

During our December visit, the Canadian and Cuban farmers agreed on the construction of 4.5 hectares of Pedestales and 16 hectares of rotational pasture.

Once established, our farmers will return to measure the results, offer further suggestions relating to herd management, milk quality and calf nutrition, and produce a training video. Next steps will focus on genetics.

Our project partner in Cuba is ANAP, Cuba’s national farmer organization. Our Canadian partner is the Vancouver-based NGO Sustainable Cities.

In these stressful times, I feel proud as a Canadian Agrologist to have the opportunity to lead this Project.

Despite many priorities at home, Beattie, Hansen and Millson have selflessly volunteered their time to travel to Cuba, to understand the Cuban production system, and to share their skills as dairymen to help make it better.

It is this generosity of spirit, helpfulness and cooperation that lies at the very heart of Canada’s farming communities.

What goes around comes around. Treat others as you would be treated. When you sign an agreement, honour it. History counts. Canadian values have worked for Canadian communities since this land was settled. There is no reason they should stop now.

I wish Canadian farmers a strong and empowered 2005 filled with community respect for agriculture.

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