

## An affair of the professional heart...

Ontario Agrologist Wendy Holm, P.Ag. Spring 2006

*"If you have the capacity, you have the responsibility..."* A personal mantra for as long as I can remember, it's fairly straightforward: if you come across a rock on the path and you can kick it aside, do so - making the path better for those who come behind is part of the journey.

As Agrologists, we have a wealth of professional capacity. Our code of ethics tells us we must exercise integrity and competence in fulfilling our professional responsibilities to the Public, the Employer or Client, the Profession and other Agrologists. Responsibilities to the employer or client are easily defined. But what are our responsibilities to one another, to the public and to the profession? And to what personal lengths must we go to meet those professional responsibilities?

In 1998, on holiday with my daughter in Cuba, I found myself face to face with these very questions.

Like so many other Agrologists, I was at the time (and remain) gravely concerned for the future of Canadian agriculture. For over 100 years, Canadian food policy was based on an understanding that protecting farmers as stewards of our foodlands was essential to sustaining rural and urban communities. Beginning in the mid 1980's, that began to change. Deputy ministers - meant to hold the line between policy and politics and deliver the public good - became openly partisan appointments, public servants morphed into bureaucrats, and issues management replaced public policy as a career track.

And there couldn't be a worse time for this to happen: with concentrated market players capturing farm margins, farm prices and incomes at record low levels, farm foreclosures at record high levels, and quarreling commodity groups fragmenting farm voice, many Agrologists - myself included - were worried.

What to do? What to do? I had been raising such concerns for years in a monthly farm column, but it wasn't till I went to Cuba in May of 1998 that the rubber hit the road. Glimpsing a path with huge boulders but much promise, I took it. And as a professional, the path less traveled by - with a nod to Robert Frost - has made all the difference.

As I sat in Havana sipping good coffee and listening to how Cuba transformed itself in one decade from monoculture to recognized world leadership in organic agriculture (Right Livelihood Award of the Swedish Parliament), little lights began to go on in my Agrologist's brain. Although facing many challenges, Cuba's farmers were also respected, earned more than doctors and lawyers, spoke in one voice, and had legislated rights to inputs and extension services. Together, we had more answers than apart. Sounded like a strategic fit to me.

"Why not bring Canada's farmers and Cuba's farmers together to see what might come of it?" I asked my Cuban host. "Why not indeed?" he replied, and the Canada Cuba farmer to Farmer Project was born.

The first delegation of 22 Canadian farmers visited Cuba in January 1999. And as I suspected, our farmers found the Cuban experience fascinating. So off I trotted to Ottawa to find this spiffy little project some funding. Several months, two trips east and 60,000 air points later, I remained empty handed. What to do? When UBC's Dean of Agriculture promised me a half a bus at a cocktail party, I realized I had little choice. The next week, I announced the upcoming visit and set to raising the \$90,000 needed to fund it. Six weeks and many small donations later, 27 Cuban farmers and scientists spent 3 weeks touring British Columbia farms, research stations and universities from the Saanich Peninsula to Ft St. John.

In the past 7 years, 330 farmers from across Canada have visited Cuba in 18 delegations.

As I write this, Vancouver entomologist Dr. Deborah Henderson is in Cuba meeting with scientists in Sancti Spiritus to collaborate on an IPM project that will - among other things - see bi-national (Cuban-bred, Canadian born) *Trichogramma sibericum* stand guard over cranberry bogs and food warehouses in British Columbia. Beyond products, Deb is importing ideas: on faculty at Kwantlen College, she is currently spearheading a Fraser Valley version of Cuba's popular CREE's - centers for the production of entomopathogens and entomophagos.

And as you read this, I am in Cuba with four Canadian dairy farmers putting the final touches on our one-year, farmer-led demonstration Project Enhancing Sustainable Dairy Production Capacity in Cuba. With \$75,000 in funding from CIDA's NGO branch and an additional \$40,000 I was able to raise from Canadian farmers, farm businesses and private citizens, this Project has built 3 hectares of grass/legume rotational grazing modules (Los Pedestales), added 16 hectares of micro-pastures (with solar-powered electric fencing donated by Gallagher), and introduced changes to animal management practices that will increase milk production capacity at CPA 26 Julio, a 100-member cooperative that produces cattle, milk, mixed crops and sugar cane on 730 hectares of land in Havana province. Our project partners are ANAP (Cuba's national farmer organization) and the Vancouver-based NGO Sustainable Cities Foundation.

Next steps include extending the sustainable dairy production model to surrounding cooperatives to create a rural centre of excellence, trialing it in other provinces, and scaling it up to a peri-urban setting.. The model also holds promise for other temperate zoned countries - Uganda has already expressed interest.

The dairy farmers at the forefront of this work - Jim and Gladys Millson of Enniskillen, Ontario, Bruce Beattie of Sundre, Alberta and Lorne Hansen of Harrison Mills, B.C. - all first visited Cuba with the Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project. Also with us this trip is Chris Crowley, from the University of British Columbia's Distance Education Department, who will produce a Spanish language training video. Special kudos also to volunteers Morgan Millson (4th year, University of Guelph) and rural electrician Darryl built 54 micropastures using solar powered electric fencing donated by Gallagher Canada and Gallagher New Zealand. (see *Did you hear the one about the farmer's daughter?* Western Dairy Farmer, August 2005, posted at [www.theholmteam.ca](http://www.theholmteam.ca).)

The farm tours of course continue. This year I am also coordinating a March IPM tour for Canadian scientists, and in May teach (for the second year) the University of British Columbia 3 credit course AGSC 302: Field Studies in Sustainable Agriculture (Cuba).

It has been an amazing 8 years. Breath-taking at times. Aside from this year's CIDA dairy project, there has been no financial support for any of this work, evoking both soul-searching questions and rushes of pride and accomplishment.

And what goes around comes around: Cuba was the first major market to open its borders to Canadian beef and cattle of any age, and has recently signed contracts to purchase 3,000 tons of skim milk powder, 250 - 500 tons of butter and 7,000 doses of semen.

For me, as an Agrologist, helping to facilitate international bridges of respect and cooperation between farm communities has been the best reward of all.

For further project information or to donate to this sturdy little project, visit [www.theholmteam.ca](http://www.theholmteam.ca). Charitable tax receipts issued.

Wendy Holm, [holm@farmertofarmer.ca](mailto:holm@farmertofarmer.ca), 604-947-2893