

## Plain and simple stuff...

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Russell Husch was President of the BCFGA back when the Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project first began. In fact, Russ and Carol were part of that first Delegation of 20 BC farmers who traveled to Cuba in 1999, starting what's become, in just 6 years, a cooperative, capacity-enhancing, sustainability-focused international farmer-to-farmer Project. Born and bred right here in BC.

Arising from a meeting in Havana with Juan Jose Leon Vega, then-head of International Relations for Cuba's Ministry of Agriculture, the idea of bringing Canada's farmers together with Cuba's farmers seemed a good one. World leaders in organic agriculture, Cuban farmers had knowledge of interest to Canadian farmers and vice versa.

I wrote a column in Country Life, 20 farmers stepped forward, and off we went in January 1999. The following August, a Delegation of 27 Cuban farmers, scientists and policy makers spent 18 days visiting farms, research stations and processing plants in British Columbia - many of them in the Okanagan.

In the ensuing 5 years, 280 more farmers from across Canada (300 in all) have participated as members of 15 Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Delegations. These tours represent the ongoing "first phase" of the work: relationship building. This winter, there are 3 farmer tours and 1 veterinary tour; see advertisement this issue for details.

This fall, we will begin work on Phase Two: cooperative capacity building. *Enhancing Sustainable Dairy Production Capacity in Cuba*, supported in part by funding from the Partnerships Branch, Canadian International Development Agency, will match Cuba's sophisticated rotational grazing systems with Canadian dairy farmer expertise to support and document a sustainable, pasture-based dairy model. It grew from the observations of Enderby dairymen Tony Tillart and Pete Bongers, who – on visiting a dairy farm in Holguin province in 2000 – felt if Cuban farmers learned better animal and dairy management skills, the rotational grazing system they'd developed to replace grains following the collapse of the Soviet Union could support a healthy increase in milk production. Each of the three Canadian dairymen participating in this Project originally came to Cuba as Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project Delegates.

Phase Three of the work — the development of an ethical "trade wheel" that would create reciprocal, sustaining markets for farm products in both countries and return profits to farmers — was sparked by comments first made by Russell Husch back in 1999 as we watched 50 gallon drums of high quality Cuban

organic orange and grapefruit juice concentrates being filled for shipment to Gerber in England.

Linkages to support this work are being crafted at the university and scientific level — in cranberry bogs in Delta, small predatory wasps used for IPM will soon be reared in Cuba thanks to the inquiring mind of Dr. Deborah Henderson — but the project remains farmer-focused.

Built not on politics and ego but cooperation and capacity, farmer to farmer initiatives have a good track record. No bureaucracy. No red tape. The drivers are respect for stewardship and the critical role farmers play in the future of our communities and our nations. Plain and simple stuff.

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