

Passion.

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November. Gravel crunches under your boots as last night's frost breaks open to the thin November sun. Woodsmoke hangs in the air like incense, announcing the approach of winter. Long, shiny ribbons of water turn fields already asleep and dreaming of next year's crop into blankets of brown corduroy. Fall clean-up's almost done, the farm looks good. Tidy and buttoned-up for winter.

Pad and pencil in pocket, you head to the tool pool for seasonal triage: this one's OK; better book this in for repair; nope, this one's beat, time to replace it. As you inspect your equipment and make notes to yourself, the dollars add up in your mind. Pretty soon, you're flexing your neck as that uncomfortable tightness across your shoulders starts to come back.

It didn't used to be like this. Booking the tractor in for repairs used to make you feel good cause it meant when you jumped back on it in the spring it would be humming. Deciding to replace the seeder meant looking forward to browsing the equipment catalogues and dealers to make sure the one you think you want is really the best for the job. It used to feel good putting money back into equipment. Making the farm stronger. Having new toys to play with. Being able to write it off. Now the thought of spending serious money seems to change your whole body posture. Who knows what the future is going to bring? Kind of takes the fun out of farming.

The whole point of farming is being good at assessing what the future will bring. What the weather is gonna do. What markets are gonna do. What this or that or the other seeds are gonna do given these soils and this climate. Half way thru the growing season, knowing pretty well how much crop you'll be taking off. And when. Knowing how much milk those cows will give five months from now, when they will calve and how fast those calves will grow. Selecting the right bulls and the right rootstock. Knowing when to cull and when to expand. The whole point of farming is being good at assessing what the future will bring. And managing sustainably for that outcome.

Now, the future is very uncertain indeed. Against the backdrop of international terrorism, is it not simple common sense that food security must become a strategic objective of domestic food policy? And that forging a domestic food policy should FINALLY become a national priority?

Even for livestock farmers, things slow down a bit in winter. Time to catch up on some correspondence. Make a dent in that stack of reading material. Take in a short course. Drop in on a few farmer meetings. Grab some family time. Get passionate.

Passionate? Yes. Passionate. Cause if farmers don't get passionate, bloodless politicians who hide behind the spin and agenda of faceless bureaucrats will get away with murder. And the bodies on the floor will be us.

Here are some passionate ideas for the coming winter:

GET PASSIONATE ABOUT FARMING

Actually take a pen an paper and write to Chretien (PM, Government of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. No stamp necessary). Copy it vanClief. And copy it to me. In short, simple sentences explain to Jean that while the rest of the world is supporting farmers (see my September column for facts), Canada is destroying the structure of farm policy. And that the \$173 BILLION US American Farm Bill (that's \$265 BILLION CANADIAN) that just passed the U.S. House of Representatives will make things much worse. Demand respect.

GET PASSIONATE ABOUT WATER

Watch the December issue of Country Life for a full feature on the water trade issue from the perspective of the farm community. Circulate it to friends. Bring it to farm meetings and get a resolution passed. Send it to Chretien and vanClief with a copy to their provincial counterparts, to the media, and to me. A major dog and pony show (federal committee) is being formed to trot out a "solution" that only makes things worse. Farmers need to be ready for it.

GET PASSIONATE IN CUBA

Yes, the Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project is entering its fourth year! This season, tours will begin in January and run through March. Follow in the footsteps of nine delegations of farmers - 167 in all - from BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario. Yes, we will visit unbelievably beautiful beaches. Yes, we will stay in gorgeous 5 star hotels and wonderful Cuban country hotels. Yes, you will see the REAL Cuba have the "trip of a lifetime".

But the real impact of this tour will be standing on the edge of vast fields of commercial organic production, meeting with the Cuban farmers who are doing it, and understanding that a) organic is doable on a large scale and b) what strategic business opportunities this opens for Canada. This project is about the development of international cooperative linkages in support of sustainable farm economics. Watch this space for further details or call me at 604.947.2893 (holm@pinc.com). Space is limited. Canadian farmers and their partners only, please.

GET PASSIONATE ABOUT WOMEN - A POST SCRIPT ON AFGHANISTAN

Farmers understand the capacity of women. In most farm families, farm women pull equally with their partners; without them farm men would be truly lost. One of the greatest tragedies of this terrible age of terrorism (America's new war, indeed...) is the gender bias dominating discussions. Wouldn't it be amazing to see what a transitional government of ALL WOMEN could do to forge a government for Afghanistan that reflected the will of Afghan communities? Female leaders of the calibre of Gro Bruntland and others who came together as a team from first world, third world and aboriginal nations alike to bring to the table experience in governance, economics, law, social justice and ethics? Women who can leave divisions of race, religion and politics at the door and lend nurturing governance hands to deliver for Afghanistan a secure a sustainable future for her children and grandchildren?

Correctly undertaken, the result would be a governance structure which had the respect of all the people. An essential element for the rebuilding of the country.

Of course, such an undertaking would have to be at the behest of the United Nations. But with the assured protection of all nations, outstanding women internationally would surely come forward for a two year task of such importance... And in so doing, perhaps establish a new model for the world. A fascinating experiment in social democracy. A quite appropriate step for Afghanistan, where women's voices have been too long silenced. A star on the beret of political ethics. And just perhaps the most acceptable political solution for all parties... Why not?

Demanding a priority be placed on farm policy. Saving Canada's water. Developing new, farmer-led cooperative economic linkages with Cuban farmers (global leaders in commercial-scale organic methods). Celebrating the value of women's voices. Getting back to passionate. Not too shabby a "do" list for the winter of 2002.