

The little project that could... A Christmas Story.

BC Holstein News, December 2005

Wendy Holm, P.Ag. 831 words

As you read this, Canadian dairy farmers Lorne Hansen (Harrison Mills, BC), Bruce Beattie (Sundre, Alberta), Jim Millson (Enniskillen, Ontario) and I are in Cuba for the final visit of our one-year project Enhancing Sustainable Dairy Production Capacity in Cuba.

It has been an amazing experience. Uplifting and co-operative, it demonstrates the very best of what farming is all about: stewardship, an instinct for community and great pride in a job well done.

When we first traveled to Cuba last December, we had in mind funding the construction of two hectares of Pedestals - a spiffy, Cuban grass/legume rotational grazing module - then returning to transfer more herd management skills.

You know what happens when you get a group of farmers together to get something done: do it right, don't stint, take pride in the outcome. Well, this was one of those times. Two hectares of pedestals soon became three plus an additional 14 hectares of rotational micro-pastures (56 in all, constructed with solar-powered electric fencing) to provide feed for heifers and cows over 130 days of lactation.

To build the extra pedestal, we cut back the length of our second project visit. The solar-powered electric fencing posed a greater challenge!

Had we the luxury of time, much of the fencing materials could have been sourced in Cuba. Insultimbers, for example, could have been replaced by rebar and rubber tire. But to meet project deadlines, materials not readily available at the cooperative had to be brought in from Canada.

And since this was Cuba's first use of solar-powered pasture fencing, we couldn't just send down the pallet - we needed also to send down the people to help them set it up. An extra trip.

I began fundraising in earnest, and Jim and Gladys Millson spent weeks coordinating the collection, palletting and shipment of the solar fencing materials.

Initially, we had hoped to ship the fencing materials in late April.

Morgan Millson (one of Jim and Gladys' brood of five, now a fourth year farm finance student at University of Guelph) volunteered to design and construct the rotational pastures.

To do this, Morgan enrolled in the University of British Columbia's AGSC 302 Field Studies in Sustainable Agriculture, which I taught in Cuba last May. She spent a day measuring pastures and discussing layouts with the Cuban farmers, but alas the paperwork was held up, the materials did not arrive in time, and no work was possible. Hugely disappointing for all of us.

A trooper, Morgan volunteered to return in August to "get 'er done. We shipped materials in July, and in August, Morgan, her friend Darryl Donneral (a rural electrician) and I spent two hugely rewarding weeks in the hot Cuban sun working alongside the Cuban farmers to erect the most beautiful solar-powered, electric-fenced rotational pastures you can imagine!

This December, Hansen, Beattie Millson and I will work with the Cuban farmers to formulate on-farm feed rations, share animal management skills (night pasturing, milking twice a day, mastitis testing, proximity of shade and water) and introduce new calf-rearing techniques.

Gladys Millson has volunteered to come down during the second week of our visit to teach female co-op farmers how to hand-raise calves and wean them onto starter rations.

Chris Crowley, filmmaker with University of British Columbia's distance education department, is along to produce a Spanish-language training video.

How has this work been funded? Gallagher Canada and Gallagher New Zealand donated \$5,114 in fencing materials. Farmers contributed \$10,040. Canadians who support the importance of this work donated \$23,000. A further \$2,500 was raised from agri-business and institutions. With CIDA's contribution of \$75,000, we have to date raised \$115,654 of our \$124,353 project budget (\$8,699 still to go!)

Stewardship. An instinct for community. Pride in a job well done. Values upon which Canada was built - and which continue to strengthen the fabric of rural life - form the cornerstones of this Project.

As you gather this month for the holiday season, share the story of this "little project that could" with family members and consider making a tax-deductible donation to support the efforts of Canadian dairy farmers Bruce, Lorne, Jim and Gladys, and farmers' daughter Morgan, who made this project so successful.

Our Canadian NGO is International Centre for Sustainable Cities (www.icsc.ca). Cheques marked "Cuba Project" and payable to Sustainable Cities Foundation should be sent to Wendy Holm, P.Ag., RR #1, HP-8, Bowen Island, BC V0N 1G0. I will submit them to Sustainable Cities on your behalf and ensure they pop a tax receipt in the mail to you right away.

And if you would like to visit this Project to see what we have accomplished, come with me to Cuba this winter as part of the Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Tours (January 23 and February 6th). Both tours visit CPA 26 July as our first farm stop, where we will be feted by the Cuban farmers with a roast pig reception "Cuban Style". See advertisement in this issue of Holstein News.

Canada and Cuba go 'way back when it comes to dairy production. Let's build on this project to go forward. According to our farmers, this sustainable pasture-based model could make Cuba self sufficient in dairy production. Strengthening international ties of cooperation between farmers is a good thing. We have much to be proud of. What goes around comes around. Building community counts.

For more information, visit www.theholmteam.ca, email me at holm@farmertofarmer.ca or give me a call at 604-947-2893.