



Cooperation – A love story

A project in Cuba shows how dairy farmers can work together, much as they do here

ALTHOUGH MUCH IS OFTEN made of producer “independence”, cooperation comes naturally to farmers.

From the barn-raising of our grandparents to helping someone get his crop in today, cooperation is rooted in rural tradition. But when you're milking cows, it's hard sometimes to get past the farm gate.

On these long winter nights, when your favourite program has already gone to re-runs and you're thinking it's time for something different on the

telly, rent Michael Moore's latest movie *Capitalism - A Love Story* (October 2010). Actually, you might just want to buy it, cause after you've watched it, you'll likely want to lend it around.

When you're finished, you'll be able to more than hold your own in conversations about the financial meltdown. And what you pick up in the process - about why it happened and what's wrong in today's economy - will make you an even more savvy defender of producer cooperation as the only alternative to market chaos.



These trellises provide food for cows in Cuba in a Canadian-led project

[The writer is an award-winning agrologist and columnist living in British Columbia]

While the theories of David Ricardo and Adam Smith were helpful to explain the workings of an 18th century economy of powerful nation states and their distant colonies, they fail miserably (not surprisingly; it has been 300 years!) to explain 21st century market forces. Today, unfettered, free flowing global capital combined with significant labour market disparities render trade destructive for many market participants. Particularly hard hit in many instances are the farmers.

In the face of highly concentrated sectors pre and post farm gate, Canada's structured forms of producer cooperation – for example supply management and the Canadian Wheat Board — are important policy tools to ensure the viability of farming and the sustainable production of food for communities.

But informal forms of cooperation are equally important. Particularly those with the power to link farmers together on an international level. That is why I am so proud of the international cooperative work that Canadian dairy farmers have supported in Cuba.

It was December 2004 that Alberta's Bruce Beattie, BC's Lorne Hansen and Ontario's Jim Millson first travelled with me to Havana to work with farmers at the Cooperative 26 July to resurrect a good Cuban idea - shelved by Cuba's Ministry of Agriculture as too costly - and make it the frontispiece of a sustainable dairy model.

Los Pedestales is a rotational grazing system of high protein pastures separated by five foot high standing walls of legumes planted under triangular wire trellises. There are 24 trellises per hectare. Divided in half through the middle, this creates 48 micro-pastures. Six or

seven high lactating cows chomp their way through each one hectare Pedestal, one small high protein grass/legume pasture a day, over the course of seven weeks (one rotation).

Designed by Cuban agronomists as a way to replace imported protein when the former Soviet Union collapsed and Cuba's economy was thrown into darkness, the unique grazing system was abandoned when increased yields were insufficient to support costs.

When Canadian farmers visiting an experimental station with me in eastern Cuba in 2001 saw the Pedestals, they were impressed. Combine this system with improved herd nutrition and management techniques, they said, and you will get lots of milk.

Ahhhh, a challenge... Gotta love em! When we started, the cooperative was in debt, losing 20-25 cows a year to drought, and milk production was an insignificant contributor to farm income.

Today, six years later, working hand in hand with our Cuban counterparts, we have built three hectares of pedestals and 30 hectares of improved rotational pastures with solar powered electric fences to support a herd of 55 milking cows.

We have installed a 100 hp vertical turbine and a full irrigation system. They now have a hammer mill and feed proportioner and are producing ration crops. This spring they will move to full on farm ration production and will implement hand-rearing of calves. They are finishing their own bulls to market weight. Milk production has already tripled and is climbing. Sales from the production of milk and meat now provides the bulk of the co-ops income. They have paid off their debt and the Cuban Institute for

the Investigation of Pastures and Forages has adopted our cooperative as an experimental farm, which means they get specialized attention when they need it.

The Cuban Ministry of Agriculture is going to award them National Reference status, which means the co-op is identified as a model for farmers across Cuba. As one of our final projects, we will be converting an old house that once belonged to the doctor of Jose Marti (Cuba's national hero) into a training centre with bunks and a classroom so other farmers can come there to learn.

All of us are volunteers. We have raised \$236,787 CAD to support this work. For more information go to <http://www.farmertofarmer.ca/esdpcc.html>

Cooperation. It is what farmers are all about. ☺

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