

Did you hear the one about the farmer's daughter?

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This August long weekend, when most young Canadians are flipping burgers and hanging out, 22 year old Morgan Millson - daughter of Ontario dairy farmers Gladys and Jim Millson - will be sweating it out in a field of red soil, pounding posts and stringing wire in the glare of the Cuban sun. Working alongside her, constructing the electric fencing system Morgan has designed, will be a dozen or so farmers from the cooperative CPA 26 Julio. It will take them a week or so to complete - long arduous work under a hot August sky.

The posts and wire, solar panels, batteries and related nuts and bolts Morgan and the Cuban farmers will use to create 16 hectares (52 micro-pastures) of rotational grazing came from Canada. Together with another 3 hectares of grass/legume strip pastures and some local sugar cane, this system will meet the nutritional needs of a 50 cow dairy herd.

Because Cuba has little experience with solar-powered electric fencing, Morgan is there to show the Cuban farmers how to use it, then help them set it up.



Farmers who are following this unique little project of international cooperation know it as the brainchild of the Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project. In the spring of 2004, with the support of Canadian NGO International Centre for Sustainable Cities, we approached the Canadian International Development Agency for small funding (\$75,000) to support a one-year demonstration project to bring Canadian dairy management skills to bear to enhance the productivity of Cuba's dairy sector.

CIDA was interested because replacing imported feed grains with a pasture-based system offers a new, sustainable dairy model for temperate zone countries.

Our Cuban partner, ANAP (Cuba's National Association of Farmers), was interested because increased dairy productivity means more income for farmers and rural communities.

The Cuban government was interested because their nutrition policy calls for a litre of milk per day up to age seven and a litre of yoghurt per day up to age of fourteen. Fifty percent of Cuba's milk supply is imported, as is all grain fed for domestic milk production. A pasture-based dairy system capable of both boosting production and eliminating the need for imports of grain and milk powder would free up scarce funds for other government priorities.

The Cuban Ministry of Agriculture was interested because we were going to resurrect a spiffy little Cuban grass/legume strip pasture model - Los Pedestales, developed to replace grain when the Soviet Union collapsed - and improve its economic viability with better farm and animal management skills.

The three Canadian dairy farmers - Jim Millson (Ontario), Bruce Beattie (Alberta) and Lorne Hansen (B.C.) - were interested because all had visited Cuba (as part of the Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer tours), knew they could make a difference, and wanted to help.

And so the one-year demonstration Project Enhancing Sustainable Dairy Production Capacity in Cuba was born.

Last November, Jim, Lorne, Bruce and I went to Cuba. After spending time at the agricultural cooperative "26 Julio" in Havana province, it was agreed that 3 Pedestals and 16 hectares of rotational pastures would be erected. ANAP offered to contribute 50 F1 bred heifers (Siboney, a Cuban Holstein-Cebu cross). Canadian farmers agreed to return this November to undertake the second half of the project: teaching the farm management skills that, together with the rotational pastures, will result in a significant increase in milk production at the CPA.

(Like what? Encouraging cow-friendly management by placing shade and water closer to the cattle, grazing at night, separating the calves from the cows, developing a locally-based starter ration, suggesting that female cooperative members be put in charge of calf rearing, using an iodine wash in the parlour and doing regular mastitis testing - although we found no mastitis when we were there).

A Spanish-language training video for extension use will be produced through the support of distance education filmmaker Chris Crowley and his employer, the University of British Columbia.

The cost of this one-year demonstration Project? ANAP contributed \$50,000 Cuban Pesos for a new irrigation system and fifty "F1" bred heifers. Canada's share of the project is \$120,000 CAD. Of that, \$75,000 has been contributed by CIDA, and \$12,000 by Canadian farmers who've come to Cuba thru the Project (Farmer to Farmer tours). Gallagher Canada and Gallagher New Zealand generously contributed \$5,000 in solar fencing materials

We have \$28,000 left to raise. And charitable tax status to offer.

Which brings us back to Morgan, out standing in her Cuban field. Like her dad Jim, Morgan has volunteered her time for two weeks this summer to give the Cuban's a hand - for no pay - because there is an important job to be done, she knows she can do it, and out of that sense of responsibility often bred in the bones of young people from farm families, has stepped forward to do so.



"No big deal" Morgan would - no doubt - respond, shy smile accompanying a shrug. But looking in her eyes, you can see the pride that comes from knowing that she CAN help, and that her knowledge is of value to the Cuban farmers. The same stuff that has driven Jim, Lorne and Bruce to join this Project - a generosity of spirit that runs deep within the farm community.

The primary link between society and its food supply, it's little wonder farmers understand and respect community. And thanks to strong policy support from supply management, it's little wonder Canada's dairy farmers are leading the way in building international bridges of capacity and cooperation to empower farm communities.

And here's where you come in. We need to raise \$28,000 to cover Canada's share of Project costs, including Morgan's trip to Cuba in August, fencing materials beyond those donated by Gallagher Canada and Gallagher New Zealand, and the cost to bring Canada's farmers back to Cuba this November.

Consider making a tax-deductible donation to this important little project. How nice to know that every penny will go directly to the work we are doing, and because of YOUR generosity, change is happening. Canadian dairy farmers abroad. Good community players in the global village. Let's put them in the spotlight by helping Morgan and her crew do a bang-up job. On behalf of dairy farmers across Canada, give me a call!

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