What the Little Red Hen finally found out.

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As last month's column drew to a close, Hen and Cow were parting in the barnyard as Hen readied herself to set out on a journey:

Cow: ...Who will save us, Hen? Who will make our case to the politicians? Who will put the starch in their political souls and the honour and integrity in their political hearts? Who will speak out for Canada's farmers? Who will help us fix this mess before its too late?

Little Red Hen: I don't know, Cow, but I'm going to find out.

TIME PASSES.
THE HERD UP THE ROAD IS AUCTIONED OFF.
HEN RETURNS FROM HER TRAVELS...

Little Red Hen: Evening, Cow... You're up late? (peering closer) Or are you?

Cow: Mmmmm..... Hmmpfh... Oh! It's you, Hen... Welcome back. Welcome back. We missed you. Things just aren't the same 'round here when you're away. Sale of old Albert's place's got everyone spooked... Most of the herd's been sold off... Mothers and daughter's split up... It's disgraceful... But what about your trip, hen? What did you find out?

Little Red Hen: You're tired, Cow. We'll talk about it in the morning...

Cow: No, Hen. You're the one who's always saying about how I don't pay enough attention to things. This is important, for goodness sake. . You've just come back!. Tell me, Hen. How was it? What did you find out? I'll stay awake.... Really...

Little Red Hen: I'll tell you what, Cow. Why don't you just nestle back into your bedding there and I'll tell you a bed time story instead.

Cow: A bed time story? But I want to know what you found out, Hen... I want to hear....

Little Red Hen: A real bed-time story, Cow. A real bed time story....

Cow: Mmmmmm... Oh all right... As long as its a real one...

Little Red Hen: I promise, Cow. That's right. Close your eyes. Once upon a time there was a Province filled with hard working farmers...

Cow: Like our province?

Little Red Hen: Shhhh.... Yes, Cow, just like our province. And they worked very hard to farm the land in such a way as to made it better for the next generation... .

Cow: And that's called "sustainable", isn't it Hen?

Little Red Hen: Yes, Cow. Very good. You do pay attention! And because many birds and fish and insects also lived there, together with many people who sometimes seemed to love the birds and fish and insects more than they loved the farmers, there were many many government regulations that the farmers had to follow.

Cow: Just like our farmer.

Little Red Hen: Right. And this cost farmers a lot of money. But there were good things too... Fair prices. Lots of cooperative diaries. Farmers were happy. Animals were happy. And even the people were happy, though prone to grumbling from time to time...

Cow: And then what happens...

Little Red Hen: Well, some pretty strange stuff. All of a sudden the tables turned on the farmers. Fair trade became free trade. Big concentrated companies started swallowing each other up till there were only two or three left. Funny enough, all offering pretty much the same price. Farmers didn't have much choice, you had to go with one of them... Prices to farmers began dropping. Speculators began buying up farmland, figuring on a change in government. Land prices increased.

Cow: Oh my goodness, Hen, if you don't mind me saying so I don't think this is a very good bed time story for you to be telling, I'm getting scared awake just thinking about it...

Little Red Hen: Well, Cow, it *is* scary. But listen-up. It gets better...

Cow: Hmmpfh...

Little Red Hen: Just when it seemed that things couldn't get worse for the farmers, there was a light at the end of the tunnel...

Cow: ON NO! NOT THE TRAIN?!

Little Red Hen: No, Cow. Not the train... A light. A way out... When humans began to pay double and triple prices for "organic" food, farmers started figuring out that all this "farming sustainably" stuff might just be worth something. And so an Agrologist and some farmers got to talking and decided a bunch of them would go down to Cuba to see what sort of things farmers might get up to together with Cuban farmers to help them both out...

Cow: An Agro-what?

Little Red Hen: An Agrologist. Someone whose responsibility is to make sure government does right by the farmers...

Cow: Oh... I knew that... Why Cuba?.

Little Red Hen: Cause Cuba leads the world in organic agriculture. Just won the Right Livelihood Award — awarded by the Swedish Parliament and dubbed the "Alternate Nobel Prize" — for Organic Farming.

Cow: No cow-pies!?

Little Red Hen: Please, Cow... "Who will help me put this trip together for the farmers" said the Agrologist? "We will" said the Cuban Ministry of Agriculture. "Not I" said the province. "Not I" said the feds. "Not I" said BC Investment Agriculture Foundation. Then we will just have to do it ourselves" said the Agrologist. And they did. The farmers went off to Cuba and

Cow: And the Agrologist?

Little Red Hen: Yes, the farmers *and* the Agrologist went off to Cuba and met with farmer co-ops there. Before they left, they met with the Cuban ministry of agriculture and agreed on a framework for a Project — they called it the BC-Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project... And they gave it to the Agrologist to help make happen.

Cow: What was the Project supposed to do, Hen?

Little Red Hen: You know how the men with the shiny hats built that new overpass on the highway last summer?

Cow: Mmmmm....

Little Red Hen: Well, this Project was about building a bridge too - sort of a bridge, anyway: a framework really - to allow Canadian farmers to work in cooperation with Cuban farmers to develop international markets for fresh and processed organic food products.

Cow: Just Cuban farmers?

Little Red Hen: No, farmers anywhere in the world. A brand new, faster-quicker-better international cooperative model that would let farmers keep their hands on the steering wheel and their profits in their pockets.

Cow: So then what?

Little Red Hen: Well, they all went back to their farms. And the Agrologist began looking for someone to support "Phase Two"...

Cow: Which was?

Little Red Hen: Bringing a Delegation of Cuban farmers back to Canada. And before you say WHY again, it's because farmers need to stand on each other's land before they can develop a real trust and respect for each other... Anyway, the Agrologist set out to find people to help make this happen. "Not I" said the Federal Agriculture Minister. "Not I" said CIDA. "Not I" said IDRC. Not I" said Investment Agriculture Foundation. "We will" said the co-ops. "We will" said the credit unions. "We will" said the farm organizations. "We will" said the labour unions. "We will" said the churches. "We will" said the Agrologists. "We will" said the Universities. "We will" said the provincial Ministries of Agriculture, Environment and Forestry. And so they did.

Cow: Then what happened?

Little Red Hen: The Cubans toured the province for three weeks and saw all there was to see. And went home to tell their friends. And once again the Agrologist sent out a Proposal describing the success of Phase Two and asked "Who will help me fund Phase Three?"?

Cow: I bet I know what happened! They all said "Not I" again, right?

Little Red Hen: No, we're coming to the good part here... This time, you see, the Agrologist also asked all the farmers the Cubans had visited to also write letters asking the federal Minister of Agriculture for his help....

Cow: Sort of like a chorus?

Little Red Hen: Precisely. And they did. And the federal agriculture minister got many letters... "We will!" said the 35 farmers who signed up for Winter 2000, the first two tours of Phase Three. "We will!" said the Municipality of the Corporation of Delta, who gave the Project a grant. "We will!" said the Cuban Government. "We will!" said the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment. "So will we" said the Physicians for Global Survival... "We're interested, tell us more" said CUSO. "Us too..." said IDRC. "Oh, well, maybe..." said the Federal Agriculture Minister. "Send it back to BC Investment Agriculture Foundation for *consideration*..." he told the Agrologist. And she did. No word as yet...

Cow: Mmmmmph... (yawn...) "Does this story have a happy ending?

Little Red Hen: Trust me Cow. To paraphrase Margaret Mead: "...Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed farmers can change the course of history for Canadian agriculture. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has..."