Diversification centres research leaders in Manitoba

Manitoba Harvest's Will Wellborn and Parkland Crop Diversification Foundation's Jeff Kostuik talk hemp at PCDF's 2013 field days.

Hemp growers in Canada are looking to Manitoba diversification centres for the most up-to-date hemp agronomy, grain and fibre research in the country.

While hemp is still a relatively small crop in Manitoba with 12,000 acres planted in 2013 and approximately 19,000 acres in 2014, it has been steadily growing thanks in part to Manitoba research. Manitoba is a major hub for hemp grain processing, with about 90 per cent of the world's hemp food market processed in the province.

Legal to grow in Canada since 1998, the first Manitoba hemp crops were planted at research facilities such as Roblin's Parkland Crop Diversification Foundation (PCDF). Diversification centres connect producers, industry and academics. They perform variety and production trials to give Manitoba farmers the information they need to make informed decisions about new crops.

"Manitoba diversification centres are really the only ones testing hemp grain and fibre on a regular basis which is very important when making decisions about varieties," says Jeff Kostuik, Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Development's diversification specialist at PCDF.

Cutting edge tools

Manitoba's diversification centres are located in Arborg, Carberry, Melita and Roblin–each with their own satellite field sites. Together, they cover a wide range of areas to more accurately provide farmers with test results in their specific region. *Growing Forward 2* provides $600,000 annually to help the centres complete their important work.

"The centres are a great forum to strengthen connections between growers, the research community, industry and entrepreneurs."

In 2014 each centre received additional funding through *Growing Forward 2*'s Growing Innovation program to purchase specialized equipment and create new opportunities for farmers. Part of the funding went toward the purchase of an aerial drone imaging system, which will be shared by all centres to provide more detailed information about soil, crops and growing conditions across the province. Producers may be able to use this information to more accurately apply fertilizers and pesticides.

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Innovation catalysts

Diversification centres also perform sustainable water management and conduct crop fertility projects. They work to enhance technology, test new varieties of crops and find new uses for crops in Manitoba.

"We're innovation catalysts," says Craig Linde, diversification specialist at Canada-Manitoba Crop Diversification Centre (CMCDC). "Right now we're testing new varieties of a range of crops from wheat to hemp to faba beans."

Essential to crop research in Manitoba

Farmers or independent organizations are encouraged to inquire if they have a crop or idea they would like tested at a diversification centre.

"Every year we form stronger relationships with producers and more people are contacting us to discuss new ideas," says Linde. "The centres are a great forum to strengthen connections between growers, the research community, industry and entrepreneurs."

Robert Misko, chair at PCDF has been on the board for approximately 14 years and has seen the impact diversification centres have made in the province. One crop that has exploded in Manitoba in recent years is soybeans, helped by the research done at diversification centres across the province.

"A lot of farmers have asked about soybeans. I'm sure the variety testing done at diversification centres has helped farmers decide to grow the crop," he says.

He explained that diversification centres are independent and unbiased. They have no vested interest in a certain crop and farmers can trust their findings. Because they are spread around the province, farmers can see how crops and varieties grow in Manitoba's diverse climates. ■

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