

More research and innovation around the corner for Canadian farmers



Birch Hills, Saskatchewan farmer, Steve Tomtene, speaks about the need for increased varietal research to keep Canadian farmers competitive – Photo credit to Shaun Haney, Real Agriculture.

August 2014, Partners in Innovation – Access to new crop varieties is of paramount importance to Steve Tomtene and his farming operation. The Birch Hills, Saskatchewan farmer says, “I think when we look back over the course of time, probably one of the biggest things that have helped us to be successful is access to new genetics and new varieties,” he says. “We all know that pest problems change, the climate changes, things evolve and it’s important to stay ahead with new genetics. It’s been a big part of our success.”

The Tomtene farm was founded in the late 1960s and they follow a mixed crop farm management strategy, growing mostly cereals and oilseeds: wheat, barley, oats, flax, canola with some pulse crops as well.

Tomtene says farming in Saskatchewan is a unique challenge for farmers and his own operation. “We farm at a disadvantage, being so far from port and so far from water; so we have to do what we do really well and produce good crops to be competitive with other countries,” explains Tomtene.

In order for farmers to compete and excel, producers are always looking for the newest and most innovative varieties which help them in their constant battle with insects, disease, and the weather including our short Canadian growing season. “We need access to genetics and varieties to stay ahead of pest problems and climate change,” Tomtene emphasises.

When asked if increased private and public sector investment in plant breeding and variety development

that will result from updated Plant Breeders’ Rights legislation could benefit his farm, Tomtene says: “I think the more money that gets spent in research over time, the more products you get out of research. There is a direct correlation. So if we can create an environment that increases the amount of research in plant genetics, in particular barley oats and wheat, I would expect there would be more products coming out that we can benefit from.”

And a larger number of varieties with a wider array of attributes create opportunities in the market place: “[It] allows us to sell unique products to different customers. It is something that excites me. I think there is a lot of opportunity there and it is all happening as we speak. And it is important to move forward with this framework to encourage the investment and all these options to become available for us,” explains Tomtene.

Saskatchewan is the top wheat producing province in Canada and Steve Tomtene says he looks forward to future innovation in cereals, hoping Canada will rise to the challenge of becoming a powerhouse for new cereal breeding research. He also offers some cautionary counsel: “We can lead the world on cereal research. But, if we don’t create the environment for breeding to expand, then someone else will and we will be on the sidelines watching some other country benefitting from the new technologies.”

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Partners in Innovation, is a coalition of farmer and industry organizations bringing together 20 organizations representing the vast majority of farmers and accounting for most of Canada’s crop production acres; including grains, oilseeds, pulse crops, vegetables and fruit, potatoes and ornamentals. The members of Partners in Innovation support amendments to Plant Breeders’ Rights which are critical to the ability of our farmers and our agricultural industry to compete in the global market and to make a contribution to the effort to feed, fuel and clothe a rapidly growing world population.

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“Saskatchewan farmer Steve Tomtene answers questions about the role of research and development for farmers, whether or not he’s worried about losing control over crop choices”