

Getting the Message Out

Barry Reisner's commitment to the seed industry includes addressing misinformation.



barryreisner

By Stephanie Fehr

BARRY REISNER is the fourth generation on his family's farm in southern Saskatchewan, which has been in operation for 98 years. The family branched into seed growing in the 1970s as a way to diversify in a tough economic climate.

Through the years, Reisner's farm offered varieties of wheat, durum, and barley, and helped introduce special crops like peas, lentils, chickpeas, and flax to the area. Introducing new crops meant new challenges. "Any time you're doing something new, you're learning. And when you're learning you make mistakes," says Reisner. "But you learn from those mistakes."

Reisner ironed out those kinks and is now helping to tackle one of the largest issues in agriculture today – farm profitability. It's an issue that concerns all sectors of agriculture, including commodity growers, seed growers, and seed companies – everyone is linked. "When our customers' profitability suffers, our profitability suffers," says Reisner. "We can't get away from that."

Reisner, Past-President of the Canadian Seed Growers' Association, has been working with the Association on the issue of profitability. The Seed Sector Review, where he served as one of the original CSGA representatives, presented an ideal vehicle.

Reisner notes at the beginning stages of the Review a variety of subgroups were involved, and it was sometimes difficult to see the similarities between the groups. "Gradually, our discussions showed that we have significant similarities and they were greater than our differences," says Reisner. "We came to a realization that we have a common goal – farm profitability. Once you realize you have a common goal, the differences don't seem so important."

Discussions also revealed the need for a focus on farmers. "Our customers became part of the pie, recognizing that their interests were as important as ours."

Unfortunately, that's not the message that got out to farmers. The stories that appeared in farm media tended to focus on the Review as a process that was only concerned with the industry. Reisner did a number of things to help counteract that message, including writing letters to the editor and doing media interviews.

"My concern was that people outside the process were judging the process, based on prejudices and suspicions," says Reisner. "The ongoing success of the process was going to be dependent on co-operation and support. Some people's biases and perceptions – which in my view were wrong – would damage the process before it had a chance to do anything of benefit to anybody."

To complicate matters further, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency was undertaking a consultative process of its own on Plant Breeders' Rights. These two processes were sometimes being lumped together in people's minds, creating the impression that the Review was all about benefits for the seed industry. While most of the farm groups Reisner spoke to recognized this wasn't the case, he knew it was important to set the record straight. "I think we quite often assume the truth will get out and people will understand things just because they are right," says Reisner. "We have to tell our story. Accuracy in reporting is our responsibility. If it's not there, we have to make sure we get the message out."

The Seed Sector Review has since evolved into the National Forum on Seed and includes a number of farm groups such as the Canadian Wheat Board, Canadian Federation of Agriculture, the National Farmers Union, and L'Union des producteurs agricoles out of Quebec. Reisner notes that the broader scope makes the discussions more meaningful, but also more challenging. "I'm not under any illusions that it's going to be easy. We're going to have some difficult discussions I'm sure, but if we reach consensus with a broad base, then the consensus means something."

Returning to the topic of farm profitability, Reisner notes agriculture needs a bigger pie so that everyone can have a piece – and not by taking away somebody else's share. He suggests diversifying into functional foods or industrial uses like ethanol, biodiesel, lubricants or feed qualities will help solve this problem. "We need to provide value to our customers," says Reisner. "That's been our role in our business and that needs to be our farm customers' vision for the future as well. All of us need to find out what our customers' needs are and then deliver products that meet those needs."

