

Hot button issues on the table in Quebec

PACN unveiling a number of new reports that could change the way agri-business is done in that province

By Heather Hudson

It's time to crane your head all the way to the east. Not that far. A little closer to centre. There you go. Welcome to Quebec, home of one of CAAR's sister associations, the Professional Association in Crop Nutrition (PACN).

According to PACN President-Chief Executive Officer Yvan Lacroix, there's no shortage of work to do in the agricultural sector of Canada's belle province. And in the interest of professional development, the western ag sector could stand to learn a thing or two about the hot topics on the other side of the country.

About the PACN

The PACN is an amalgamation of companies recognized for their knowledge in crop nutrition and their contribution to producing healthy food and cost-effective, sustainable agriculture.

"PACN promotes the essential contribution of fertilizer in the production of healthy, quality food," explains Lacroix. "We make political and economic presentations to government of different levels to promote the interest of our sector to be sure the fertilizer sector in Quebec is respected and understood."

Active members such as La Coop fédérée, Agrocentre, Synagri, William Houde and Agri-100 are organizations that produce, blend and distribute mineral fertilizers to Quebec agricultural producers for their crop production. Manufacturers like Agrium, Bayer and DuPont are also members, along with raw material and other input suppliers.

Lacroix says the PACN's current challenges include environmental and public opinion concerns about fertilizer and pesticides and the waning profitability of the industry. "We are working with our industry to work on education from the ground up, lobby government on our producers' behalf and address liability of the industry on the use of fertilizers."

As a new year begins, there are a few major initiatives coming to a head after months of work. Here is an overview of two of them:

Reference Guide on Fertilization

The Reference Guide on Fertilization is considered a chapbook for agronomists and advisors working in the field with producers. It makes practical, environmental and economic recommendations on the use of fertilizers for all crops used in Quebec agriculture.

Updated every five to seven years, a new iteration was made available for the entire industry in January 2011. While there was a time when the PACN produced the guide independently, a more collective approach is being taken with consultation from government, public and private sectors.

"In Quebec we have public and private advisors, some work for companies, others for government. [This guide ensures] everyone is on the same page when thinking about fertilizer recommendations," says Lacroix. "The private advisors shared their knowledge and they contributed to make recommendations that meet the needs of the industry."

The guide outlines practical recommendations on using particular fertilizers in the field and is broken down by crop. "You can also find different definitions and applications, outlining what exactly are nitrates, phosphorus and authentic organic material and how should they be used."

Green Paper on the New Agriculture and Agri-Food Policy

Though this weighty document has been in the works for years, it is just being made available early in 2011. It has origins in the commission led by Jean Pronovost, a mandate by Quebec's Ministry of Agriculture for a review of the agriculture and agri-food policy in Quebec.

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“[The commission] studied everything and made a report. Many of the issues that the green report addresses come from there,” says Lacroix.

With consultation among 700 members from all walks of the agriculture sector, some of the main issues being uncovered include:

- Striking the right balance between the economic development of agriculture in the region, answering environmental concerns and maintaining quality of the food.
- Questioning the efficacy of the Union of Producers – a mandatory membership for producers earning more than \$5,000 in revenue from agriculture. “During the Pronovost commission, many groups challenged this association as the only union to which they can belong. Many of them are asking for more choice; it’s very important for many people to have more options and ask whether or not the Union of Producers properly represents their business, according to comments in Pronovost’s report,” says Lacroix.

- The request for a level playing field when it comes to marketing of agriculture and food products. A law first passed in 1956 means producers wishing to bring products to market must negotiate with the buyers (processors) through the *Régie des marchés agricole et alimentaire du Québec* (Marketing Board). Many buyers are now asking that the law be modernized to ensure they become part of the decision making process. This would create a fair balance in their negotiations with producers.

Lacroix says it makes good agricultural and business sense for associations across the country to be invested in the issues other organizations are facing even when it might not seem to directly apply to their interests. “It is good to be in a position to understand many issues that are happening across Canada.”

When producers and stakeholders make gains in other parts of the country, we could all stand to taken notes. ♦



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