



Family business owner takes over

CAAR to have strong voice in industry under Jessiman's leadership

By Heather Hudson

You might say David Jessiman is uniquely suited to his role as CAAR's newest board chair.

As owner of Midwest Agro Ltd., a 13-location agricultural and petroleum supply business with a head office in Lucky Lake, Sask., Jessiman has experience taking the pulse of people spread across distances.

He likens the challenge of running his company, which spans different soil zones and crops, to answering to CAAR members spread far and wide across the country. Jessiman expects he'll bring the same common sense sensibility to his role as board chair. "There are different situations and different personalities and it's all a matter of finding common ground," he says.

This diplomacy and relaxed, flexible nature may be at the heart of his success as a businessperson. In 1982, Jessiman took a chance buying an Esso bulk station he had worked at as a student. "It was a small business under my name. I wasn't even incorporated at first. My plan was to run it and start farming."

But it turned out he had more of a mind for business than he gave himself credit for. Gradually, the company started expanding to include new locations and services like chemical, fertilizer, crop protection, livestock nutrition and equipment rentals, in addition to the original lubes and fuel. It became Midwest Agro in 1994 and got so busy that his older brother took over the farm that he never quite got to.

"I sure don't regret not getting into farming because this is a business I built on my own and it seems to be running very well."

Like most savvy ag-retailers he's got an eye for retaining stellar employees, noting that the philosophy among the 35 staffers in all locations is to work hard and play hard. "It seems like once they get here, [a work ethic] is already instilled in them because all of our people are Type A personalities. They don't sit around and wait for something to happen. They make it happen."

Proving that it's a family business, Jessiman's wife, Lois, and their two sons are heavily involved in operations. Jason is the site manager at the Beechy location while Jared is putting his recently attained agribusiness degree to use at the Lucky Lake office overseeing logistics such as pricing and ordering.

"I find it exciting that they're here. I hope they stay but if they want to move on to something else I sure wouldn't stop them. When I retire, [my sons] will succeed me and hopefully it'll be a type of arrangement where I'm still involved. I can't see myself ever wanting to retire completely. I don't like to sit around."

Which is why when many people are winding down their careers, Jessiman is setting his sights on new challenges with CAAR, noting that with the business running smoothly he has more time and energy for the board.

It was after several years as a passive member that he joined the board in 2005. "I was just at the point that I didn't feel I was getting much out of CAAR and then I was asked to go on the board. I thought, instead of sitting back and complaining I should be a little bit more active."

Almost immediately, his perspective on the association changed. An insider view offered details on what CAAR was working to accomplish, including lobbying efforts, meetings with government and the Canadian Fertilizer Institute and the inner workings of the industry. "I saw what is involved in reaching out and working to assist dealers. It wasn't until I was a board member that I realized all the benefits involved with being a member, things like better rates on credit cards, insurance, access to seminars and so on.

"I realized that if you took advantage of membership it paid itself back several times over."

Jessiman says as board chair he'll work to reaffirm a connection with members and demonstrate what is done with their membership money and how CAAR makes their lives simpler, including helping them get through regulations and protocols required to be an ag-chem dealer. But he also wants to ensure member dealers' issues are brought to the forefront of agriculture.

"The main focus is that we want to be heard as an industry more. With my board chairmanship the independent voice will be as loud as multinational companies."

This kind of ambitious agenda will require tact, diplomacy and passion. We think we've found the right person for the job. ♦