

# The Western Canadian Dairy Seminar – The First 25 Years

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## ■ Take Home Messages

- ▶ Over the past quarter century, attendance at the Western Canadian Dairy Seminar (WCDS), initially known as the Alberta Dairy Seminar, has grown from less than 100 to over 700.
- ▶ The WCDS is now recognized as one of the premier dairy conferences of its kind in the world. The WCDS has been an important contributor to maintaining the overall efficiency and productivity of the Western Canadian dairy industry by providing all stakeholders with an opportunity to keep abreast of the latest developments in research, technology, and policy that influence production efficiency, quality, and marketing of milk and milk products.
- ▶ The ingredients that have led to the success of the seminar include: excellent speakers, a dedicated organizing committee representing a broad cross section of the industry, a high quality proceedings, and excellent support from our sponsors.

## ■ Introduction

One of the most enjoyable and satisfying elements of my career at the University of Alberta has been my involvement with the Western Canadian Dairy Seminar. I have had the privilege of being Program Director for the first 22 years of the seminar, except for one year when I was on sabbatical. Karen Beauchemin took over as Program Director for 2005. She and Lorraine Doepel served as Co-Chairs for the 2006 program. Karen has served on the program committee for many years and thus has played a very influential role in the development of the WCDS program over the years. With the departure of Karen for sabbatical in Australia (and the stress of worrying about sharks and jelly fish on those sweaty beaches of Australia), Lorraine took on the job of Program Director. Based on the excellent program that Lorraine has

developed for 2007, the conference is in very good hands as we enter the second half century of the WCDS.

Over the years we have been fortunate to have had a really dedicated group of people serve on the organizing committee for the seminar. The foresight, hard work and commitment of these people has been a key factor in the successful evolution of the seminar. A second essential ingredient for success has been our emphasis on quality speakers. From the outset we have sought out the very best people who were recognized experts in their field and who also had the ability to communicate to producers and other industry stakeholders. As the attendance at the seminar grew so did our sponsor base and this allowed us to continue to attract the very best speakers regardless of where they lived on the globe. From the outset the seminar attracted a core group of people who returned year after year and, through their enthusiasm for the seminar, helped to spread the word on the quality of the program. We have also been fortunate to have had excellent conference coordinators for the seminar; from Val Smyth, to Aileen Reilly to Joanne Morrison. The final key ingredient in the overall success of the seminar has been the quality of the proceedings. From the outset we placed a lot of emphasis on ensuring that the proceedings were top quality and, once the internet became available, we also made the proceedings available on our website without charge.

## ■ The Birth

Days after my arrival in Alberta in January 1977, my former supervisor Dr Frank Aherne told me that we were heading to Banff to attend the Banff Pork Seminar (BPS) – an annual ritual that continued for several years. Wayne Lambie provides an excellent account of the origins, and history, of the BPS as part the 35th Anniversary Proceedings published in 2006. My impressions of the BPS were so positive that within a couple of years of being appointed Assistant Professor at the University of Alberta, I convened a meeting of producers, government, and industry leaders at Alumni house on the University of Alberta Campus in the summer of 1982. The meeting was co-hosted by the U of A Faculty of Extension and the Department of Animal Science. The attendance also included representatives from Alberta Milk Producers Association and Alberta Agriculture. An organising committee was established, and over the next several months a series of meetings was held to develop the program for the first Alberta Dairy Seminar that was held in Banff from April 3 to 6<sup>th</sup>, 1983. The first seminar attracted 77 paid registrants plus resource people for a total of 95 participants. From the outset the seminar targeted both producers and other industry stakeholders interested in the latest dairy production technology and science. The first seminar started with a wine and cheese on the Sunday evening followed by two full day programs on Monday and Tuesday and ending at noon on Wednesday. The

start date was moved to Monday on a trial basis before the organizers eventually settled on the Tuesday evening for the opening wine and cheese followed by the program on Wednesday through Friday at noon. The original two and half day format for the seminar, modelled on the Banff Pork Seminar, has essentially been preserved to this day.

## ■ To Red Deer via the Rocky Mountains

For the first five years (1983 through 1988) the conference was held in Banff with attendance hovering around the 100 mark. In those early years the economic viability of the seminar was on a very precarious footing and the U of A was called upon to bridge the gap between revenues and expenses on more than one occasion. At the end of the 1988 seminar it was decided to try a new location in an effort to boost attendance and reduce costs. The new location was Kananaskis which had expanded facilities available following the 1988 Winter Olympics. In addition to deciding to change the location of the seminar, the organising committee for the 1989 seminar made another key decision. As the seminar was starting to attract people from other Western Canadian provinces, it was decided to change the name of the seminar from the Alberta Dairy seminar to the Western Canadian Dairy Seminar. The Kananaskis location, and the name change, failed to substantially boost attendance, attracting 110 people in 1989 and 120 in 1990.

When the organising committee met in the summer of 1990 to plan for the 1991 seminar the mood was rather sombre as the committee wrestled with the question of whether Alberta could support a viable dairy conference. Among the options discussed was the possibility of going to an every second year format as a means of boosting attendance. A proposal to move the conference to Calgary, Edmonton or Red Deer caused considerable debate as many were reluctant to leave the idyllic Rocky Mountain setting. It was eventually decided to move to Red Deer for the 1991 seminar. In making this decision the general consensus was that the seminar would rotate between Red Deer, Edmonton and Calgary. However, as the Red Deer venue started to attract more and more people the intent to rotate the venue was quickly forgotten.

The first seminar held in Red Deer attracted close to 200 people to the great relief of the organising committee. By 1995 the attendance had jumped to 350 followed by steady annual increases over the next 10 years. The breaking of the 500, 600, and finally, the 700 attendance mark, was a source of great pride for all those involved.

## ■ The People Behind the Seminar

The University of Alberta Faculty of Extension continued to partner with the Department of Animal Science in the organizing of the seminar, and the publishing of the proceedings, until 1992 when the U of A Department of Animal Science (now the Department of Agricultural, Food and Nutritional Science) assumed this responsibility. More recently, the U of A Department of Rural Economy joined the organizing committee and has been represented by Len Bauer, Scott Jeffrey and Ellen Goddard. Faculty of Extension personnel who played a key role in the early years of the Seminar included Wayne Lambie, Jerome Martin (who served as Managing Editor for a number of years), Val Smyth as conference coordinator, and Sheila Greenberg.

Alberta Agriculture has been a key partner throughout the lifetime of the seminar and Janette McDonald, Ed Bristow, Brian Cameron, Rick Corbett, Brian Rhiness, Gerald Ollis, Bill Slack, Ray Grapentine, David Domes, David Croy, Harry Pohl, Brian Radke and Divakar Ambrose have made important contributions over the years.

Alberta Milk were at the table from the outset and they have continued to be strong supporters of the seminar over the past quarter century. The initial membership of the Advisory committee expanded over the years to include representation from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (Lyle Rode and Karen Beauchemin have played key leadership roles), Alberta Veterinary Medical Association (Dwayne Elaszuk, Jim Lawrence, Steve Radostits, Bruce Wine, Shanna Clinch, Dave Cliplef), Animal Nutrition Association of Canada, representatives from BC (Ron Charles, David Gibson, Mary Lou Swift, Bill Vanderkooi, Rod Gilmer), Saskatchewan (Sean Gorrill did an amazing job in promoting the WCDS, Fonda Herman) and Manitoba (Kim Redden, Kim Kaminsky, Hans Gorter) and representation from the dairy processing sector, financial institutions, equipment suppliers and the pharmaceutical industry.

Producer and industry support has been a key factor in the development and continued success of the seminar. Over the years we have been fortunate to have had the strong support of Elmer Kadatz, Bob Westra, Henry Schmiemann, Stephen Swainson, Jim Steuhmer, Bill Charlton, Wes Engen, Ron Green, Barry Robinson, David Gibson, Bernie Grumpelt, Cor Abma, Harry Koeckhoven, Tim Hofstra, John Alker, Clare Watson, Tom Lampman, Bill Feenstra, Doug Shields, Peter Schuld, Jim Parker, Rients Palsma, Marius Labentowicz, Aart Okkema, Dean Barr, John Ekkel, Dave Nonay, Alan Vaage, Al De Boer, Doug Wilson, Mike Paterson, Mike Mavromaras, John van der Wal, Mike Ross, Cal Kwantes, Karen Marcotte, Catherine Tokarz, Dale Brown, Bob Berry, Albert Kamps and Murray Smith.

The conference coordinators have been responsible for most of the heavy lifting associated with running a first class conference. The first conference

coordinator was Val Smyth who handed the reins over to Aileen Reilly for the 1992 and subsequent conferences, when Joanne Morrison took over starting with the 1999 seminar. Each of these coordinators put their own particular stamp on the job, but attention to detail has been the hallmark of their work over the years. The role of the conference coordinator in helping to establish the WCDS as a world-class conference cannot be overstated. Their professional approach, and their involvement in every facet of the conference, has been the major contributor to the establishment of the first class reputation of the WCDS. Under Joanne Morrison's tenure this position has achieved even greater stature so that Joanne is now very much synonymous with everything that makes WCDS a truly world class conference.

## ■ The Speakers – Focus on Quality

Over the past 25 years, more than 300 different speakers, drawn from academia, government and industry, have participated in the seminar. This represents an average of 13 original speakers per year for the 25 year history of the seminar. The extraordinary breath and diversity of talent represented by this diverse group of speakers is what has made the WCDS so special over the years. Those attending the seminar could always be guaranteed a fresh viewpoint on a wide range of topics – there was always something for everyone. Over the years a number of speakers returned multiple times. Those speaking four or more times included Gordon Atkins (4), Karen Beauchemin (4), Mike Hutjens (6), Gerald Ollis (4) Lyle Rode (5), Jim Spain (4) and Randy Shaver (5). Mark Varner and Jim Quigley also returned multiple times and they have been great friends and boosters of WCDS.

Although most speakers over the years did a superb job, there were some that were particular favourites. These included Andy Johnson, Gordie Jones, Roger Blowey, Randy Shaver, Jim Spain and Mike Hutjens. Mike and Jim had a very special ability to connect with the audience, their jokes, and exceptional capacity to tease each other, are the stuff of legend. If one had to name one person as the “Dean” of speakers, the title would have to go to Mike Hutjens whose wit, high energy, and enthusiasm have made his appearances so special since his first talk in 1989. Probably the most poignant moment in the history of the seminar was when Roger Blowey talked about his personal experience in dealing with the foot and mouth outbreak in Britain; there was hardly a dry eye in the audience as he recounted the impact of the disease on individual families, including his own.

## ■ The Playboy Centerfold

Over the years, The WCDS has had its share of good jokes told by the

speakers – often at their own expense. Having fun along the way helped keep the audience engaged and interested over two and a half days of fairly heavy duty technical information. The interaction among speakers has also been a lot of fun especially as people like Randy Shaver, Jim Spain and Mike Hutjens poked fun at each other. For the most part the audience really enjoyed this repartee but every now and then an off colour joke would run foul of some people in the audience and the organisers would hear about it in the conference evaluations. Although most people had a good sense of humour there were clear boundaries for some in our audience. As the Program Director I was always sensitive to when a speaker would ‘cross the line’. So it was early one morning in 1986, when one of our first speakers was Jerry O’Shea from Ireland talking on the subject of the effect of poorly maintained, or inferior, milking equipment. To illustrate that the mammary gland was a delicate organ Jerry brought along a prop in the form of Playboy magazine – which he proceeded to open at the centrefold. I had expected to receive some negative comments in the evaluations on this public display but, probably because Jerry had such a way with words, there was not a single negative comment.

## ■ 9:01 at 5:01

Those who have attended the WCDS over the years will know that the seminar was much more than a one way flow of information from the speakers to the audience. Some of the best learning opportunities occurred in informal groups over meals, coffee breaks, in the lounge, or whenever two or more people got together. I still remember the early days of the seminar in Banff when we never seemed to need much sleep and games of shuffle board (Val Smyth was my coach), and animated discussion, would continue into the wee hours of the morning. The producer to producer interaction became a particularly important technology transfer vehicle as ideas were shared in response to what was heard in the formal program. The introduction of the industry displays added a new dimension to the conference and provided enhanced opportunity for producer – industry interaction. Once the seminar moved to Red Deer the hospitality suite became a popular spot for speakers and others to congregate and enjoy a cool beverage. People quickly understood that 9:01 at 5:01 meant an invitation to congregate in room 901 for lively discussion right after the program ended at 5:00 pm.

## ■ The Evolution of the Seminar Program

In the early years of the seminar the format was very simple with about a dozen talks over two and a half days and no concurrent sessions. As the attendance grew we started to experiment with having concurrent sessions as

a means of providing more variety in the program. Although the concept of concurrent sessions is well accepted now, there was a lot of resistance, within the program committee and from among those attending WCDS, when this was first tried. One of the factors fuelling the resistance was that people were not happy about having to choose between two concurrent sessions that they were keenly interested in. A classic example was an animated debate between a husband and wife team that I observed at the start of one of these concurrent sessions. When I approached the couple, they started to complain that they did not like being forced to choose between the two sessions as they were interested in both. When I suggested that the solution was for each of them to attend a different session so that they could share the information later, the wife replied that she “could not trust her husband to get the facts right”. Other innovations introduced over the years that have contributed to the success of WCDS include: the pre-conference farm tours, pre-conference workshops, specialized workshops during the conference proper and evening sessions that ranged from “Bear Pits” to meet the speaker sessions. Another innovation was the introduction of a half day policy session where topics like supply management could always be counted on to provoke a lively debate.

From the outset, a key objective of the WCDS has been to provide producers with information and technologies that they could take home and immediately implement on their farm. Nutrition, reproduction, animal health and management have been recurring themes at WCDS over the years. An example of the impact of the seminar was the switch from feeding forage and concentrate separately, to TMR feeding. This change, like many other changes in the industry, did not occur overnight but required repetition over a number of years before it gained wide acceptance. Other topics that became regular favourites included forage quality, mastitis, housing and equipment, cow comfort, dairy cattle breeding, human resources, risk management and succession planning.

**Table 1. Alberta Dairy Data**

	1983	1995	2006
Producers	1,458	1,162	698
Total Volume (litres)	497,054,585	581,041,000	624,028,164
Volume (kg)	18,173,676	21,418,914	23,306,003
BF Test	3.66	3.68	3.73
Class 1 Sales (litres)	258,549,670	289,547,708	326,206,948
Utilization (%)	76.31	80.46	86.73
Cream Shippers	2,814	65	6
Ave. Daily Shipments (l)	1,060	1,370	2,493
Total MSQ (kgs)	11,276,000	10,302,647	10,914,250
% of National Plan	6.71	6.52	6.30
MSQ Value per kg	\$6.00	\$27.00	\$70.33
Fluid Value per litre	\$150.00	\$313.00	\$1,147.81
Producer Fluid Revenue (\$/hl)	\$43.14	\$61.19	\$71.03
Producer MSQ Revenue (\$/hl)	\$34.82	\$47.02	\$57.34

## ■ Changes in the Dairy Industry

Over the past 25 years the Western Canadian dairy industry has seen many changes. Some of the more obvious have been the substantial reduction in the number of dairy producers and the dramatic increase in milk yield per cow. I am indebted to Gerd Andres for providing me with some historical data for Alberta (Table 1); similar trends have been observed in BC, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, although the details will differ. Some of the more interesting changes for the years 1983 to 2006 include:

- ▶ A 50% reduction in the number of Alberta producers from about 1,458 to 698. The number of cream shippers declined from 2,814 to 6.
- ▶ MSQ value/kg increased from \$6.00 to \$70.33. Fluid value/kg increased from \$150 to \$1,147.
- ▶ In the early 1990's there was a concern that we would be short of SNF. This concern never materialized and today we are concerned that we have a surplus of SNF.
- ▶ In 1995 new WTO rules were introduced that opened the borders for imports, even if the tariffs were high. This also led to no more levy collection from producers and the introduction of Special Classes. It also led to milk being classified from 5 classes to 16 classes.

- ▶ In the mid 90's milk pricing changed from volume pricing to component pricing.
- ▶ In 96 and 97 the P5 and WMP were formed so producers in each pool share quota allocation and pricing allowing processors to close plants in provinces where they were no longer needed – from a processor perspective.
- ▶ In the 90's there was processor consolidation with the merger of Central Dairy Pool, Northern Dairy Pool, Dairyland (BC) and Saskatchewan Dairy Producers which eventually led to the creation of Saputo. There also were several smaller processors that were purchased by the Co-op with the closing of small cheese plants by the Co-op throughout Alberta.
- ▶ Throughout the 80's & 90's the provincial government reduced dairy personnel with the eventual closure of the Dairy Branch and Dairy Processing Branch in Wetaskiwin.
- ▶ In 2002 the Dairy Board functions and Alberta Milk Producers functions were merged to form Alberta Milk

■ **Share your Memories of WCDS**

The organizing committee would love to hear about your memories of the first 25 years of WCDS. We know that there are many good stories out there so feel free to share them with us. Please send your email to [wcds@ualberta.ca](mailto:wcds@ualberta.ca).





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