

Straight
Talk

by WENDY HOLM, P.A.C.

Stories from the back roads of Cuba

I love traveling with farmers. Talk is straight-forward, interest is genuine and that particular brand of farm humour uniquely suited to my sensibilities. Plus you can learn a lot if you pay attention...

Like what? Well, like this for example: a vignette from the backroads of Cuba.

Since Monday I'd been promising them a treat. "Wait till you see it!" I proclaimed. "I'll just bet you haven't seen anything like this before."

"Them" was a bus load of Canadian farmers, many of whom were dairymen from Chemanus, Saanich and Armstrong-Enderby and grain farmers from the Peace.

We'd been visiting farms for a week now and knew a fair bit about Cuba's Special Period: the economic double-whammy of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the American Helms-Burton trade embargo.

Milk production a national priority

All they knew was the system we were going to see on Thursday was, in my opinion, pretty clever and had something to do with intensive pasture management. They also knew that a lack of feed grains during the Special Period had made boosting Cuban milk production a national priority.

As I trotted over a rise ahead of the group, my agrologist's heart felt something akin to pride anticipating the farmers' reaction to what they would see: Laid out like ribbons in the afternoon sun, the intensive pasture management trials underway at El Vapor represent a triumph of beneficent ultimate, solid stewardship and good farm extension.

Picture this: a lush pasture divided into long thin ribbons by a trellis system planted to legumes. Over the trellises, forming a two sided triangular tent, is page wire. The legume fills out and eventually sends its shoots out through the page wire.

Nutritional uptake maximized

These lush trellises – resembling long, skinny "chia pets" – define aisles perhaps 75 feet in width that are fenced at either end. The cattle graze the grass, graze the legumes and then are moved along to the next aisle, timed such that nutritional uptake is maximized (some 13-17 days from emergence).

"What do you think?" I ask. The Canadian farmers are impressed: "Well, what'dya know ..." "Damn clever." "No tractors. No petroleum. No compaction." "No reason why they can't feed Holsteins here ..."

Next we go to the milking parlour. Pretty basic. I see two of our dairymen pointing up at the ceiling and exchanging comments. I moosey over.

"OK, what are you guys looking at?" I ask.

"See those wires up there?" they reply. I note two innocuous-looking bare electrical wires twisted together, Cuban-Special-Period-style. "Tingle electricity," they pronounce.

"Cattle are something like 20 times more sensitive than humans to tingle electricity. We only learned this in the mid 70's. Unless you insulate your parlour, your floors, all your electrical connections really

well, the girls are gonna feel it when they come in to milk and when they're all agitated, forget it as far as let-down is concerned." (Remembering my days as a nursing mother, I know exactly what they are talking about ...)

"If you insulated this place from top to bottom and got rid of the mastitis, you'd do a heck of a lot to improve production," they say. We next go out to look at the calves corralled together in an open shed.

"Most of them have had pneumonia" notes the dairyman on my right "you can tell from the head size. That'll cut production in half right there."

We enjoy some strong Cuban coffee,

"... pasture management trials are a triumph of beneficial climate, solid stewardship and good farming ..."

fresh-squeezed orange juice, pineapple, six varieties of bananas, farmers' cheese and run while we talk to our Cuban counterparts about their efforts to improve production.

Afterwards, we get back on the bus. "There's no reason why they can't feed a purebred dairy herd down here," say the farmers. "Particularly with that pasture system. A few management changes here and there, some upgrading and insulation to the parlours, no reason why they couldn't increase milk production significantly with a new herd."

Time to reflect, or catch a snooze ...

As we wind our way back to the Hotel Pernik for dinner, people settle back in their seats and reflect on the day. Some catch a quick snooze, others plan whose room to meet in for a drink before dinner. The promise of a Cuban baseball game in the stadium across the road – Holguin, the

home team, is playing tonight – prompts discussion of a meeting place. One farm tour day left, then it's off to Havana for three days of "R and R" before heading home. People are getting excited to see Havana and hear some Cuban jazz. Meanwhile, the agrologist takes notes.

"Idea seeds" tucked away and grow

Like little "idea seeds," the events of the day are tucked away and grow quietly under cover.

Several months later, in Canada and in Havana, a plan is hatched. Project One will put together a team of two Canadian dairymen to work with a Cuban dairy cooperative over a three year period to see how much they can improve milk production through changes to management, infrastructure and genetics.

In exchange? A Cuban team to give Canadian farmers a similar "leg up" in the area of commercial organic production methods (perhaps the fledgling beginnings of a centre of excellence in organic agriculture).

And to work with the Greater Vancouver Regional District to "trial" an urban organic garden on Colony Farm.

Cooperation. Sharing information. Standing stronger together. Paving the way for more commercially-oriented cooperative joint venture opportunities down the road.

The very essence of the farming ethic. Alive and well in this remarkable (no longer can we call it little) international project.

Come with us on one of the three remaining two week trips: January 15, February 5, February 26. Join farmers from across Canada in the trip of a lifetime. And find out just how much you wind up getting back in return.

Life is about personal connections. As Margaret Mead once said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has..."

